Find A Way by Booklover1217

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)
Genre: F/M, Fluff and Angst, Happy Ending, M/M
Language: English
Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Will Byers
Relationships: Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Max/Lucas Sinclair, Will Byers/Lucas Sinclair
Status: In-Progress
Published: 2017-11-03
Updated: 2017-11-19
Packaged: 2022-04-02 14:55:08
Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Warnings: Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Chapters: 3
Words: 22,980
Publisher: archiveofourown.org
Summary:

El Ives...once known as Jane...has always been running, running and hiding from the past that has continued to haunt and hunt her for her entire life. She never let herself get attached, knowing everything could be ripped away from her in seconds, as it had been time and time again. But that was until she met Mike Wheeler...and everything changed...

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

> Hey guys!!! I'm back, finally lol I thought I'd post the first chapter of what will hopefully be my new story. I have had the worst writer's block lately and am not entirely sure how happy I am with this so far but I thought I'd get it out and let you judge :) I only have two chapters written so far so I won't be posting as quickly as I usually do but I'll try to update as quick as possible.

The young woman known as Terry Ives frantically pushed chairs against the door she was trying to barricade, her mind fuzzy with panic, hands shaking uncontrollably and slick with sweat, causing them to slide on the smooth wood.

The tinkle of shattering glass and the hard bark of voices echoed through the dark, shadowy house as they began to force their way into the house...forcing their way closer to them.

Terry's throat tightened with fear, her heart slamming against her ribs as her eyes immediately sought out the tiny girl who trembled by the side of the door, her tiny arms wrapped tightly around her knees as silent tears coursed down her pale cheeks.
The girl flinched as the thud of heavy footsteps came closer, whimpering and curling in closer as her brown eyes darkened with fear.

She was shivering inside the grey jacket that seemed to swallow her up, her fingers tightening on her beloved stuffed lion, burying her face in it's ratty fur. She whimpered quietly, the sound swallowed by the bangs and loud voices moving through the house, the icy fear spreading through her veins leaving her mute.

This is all my fault, Terry thought as she stared down at her daughter, guilt slicing through her, cutting deep as she began to pace back and forth, running a hand through her hair panickily as her heart pounded in her chest, racing so fast she felt panicked bile rise

in her throat. Why didn't I listen to them?

Everyone had warned her all those years ago not to get involved with them, with the so-called Department of Energy, the mask they wore for the evil-doings they'd been performing for years and had soon come to realise soon after the pregnancy test she'd taken in the labs had turned positive, and their eyes had turned conniving and greedy. Her sister, her friends, all the others had known what they were, what they would try to do to her and her unborn child but no, she had known better and now...

Terry let out of a quiet sob, pressing her hand to her mouth to smother the sound as she froze in the middle of the room, her legs trembling weakly as the knowledge of what she was about to do...had to do...settled heavily in her mind.

They had tried to take her daughter from her as a newborn, standing outside the delivery room and bribing the nurses so they would hand the child over to them when the time came. But Terry refused, clutching her daughter to her chest and threatening anyone who came near them, not letting go of her for a second. They had then tried to have her committed, claiming her mentally unstable, using any despicable method they could so they could gain custody of her child. A child they wanted to experiment on, to keep locked away from the world and forge into a weapon for their use...all because of her stupidity. So, she had ran. And she had kept on running for six long years.

But it was too late. They had found her, they had found them both. And there was no-where left to run.

Or so they thought, Terry thought as she shook her head, bringing her mind back into focus as she turned and bolted across the room, pulling the doors of the closet open and yanking out the backpack that sat tucked under a pile of blankets, quickly unzipping it and rummaging through the contents with trembling fingers.

Spare set of clothes...food if she gets hungry...and the fake passport and birth certificate she'd had made only a few weeks ago. Something inside her had known that she would need them, a dread and urgency that had coated her insides, leaving her cold, on edge and

jumping at every sound for weeks. Some instinct that had warned her, urging her on.

God...how had they found them? She'd been so careful all this time, moving every few months, using false names and never telling a soul where she was going. She had even lied about her daughter's age, telling anyone who asked that she was only four, which truly wasn't hard to believe. She was a tiny thing, lithe and graceful, with a precious round face that hadn't thinned out from the baby days yet, still chubby and sweet.

She had changed her appearance once a year as well, dying or cutting her hair, getting a false tan, and staying in places that were completely off the grid, such as the cabin they were hiding in now. The owner had left it empty for the winter, well-stocked with food, and her first thought when she drove past it only four months ago was how perfect it was, sitting in a clearing in the woods miles from the nearest town. No-one to be curious or suspicious, no reason to be afraid. She'd been so careful...but it didn't matter anymore. All the mattered was her daughter.

They underestimated her. They always had. That's how she'd escaped in the first place, sneaking through the staff's quarters and out the side door of the hospital with her daughter without a single alarm being rung, slipping past the guards they'd had planted by borrowing a nurse's uniform. She'd always been smart, and she'd always had a plan.

They should have known she'd be ready for them. That she'd never let her guard down again. They were never going to get their hands on her daughter...even if...even if it meant....that she had to lose her too.

The little girl clutched on the floor clutched her ragged stuffed lion to her chest, fingers clenching in its soft fur as she sobbed, fear a living creature inside her, clawing at her stomach that was squeezing so hard she felt like she was going to be sick. She buried her face into her shoulder, sobbing and shaking as scalding tears ran down her cheeks, the hard voices and loud bangs getting closer and closer.

'Mama', she cried out, her heart skittering in terror as something

slammed against the door, the banging vibrating along her spine, impatient hands slamming against it again and again until she had to press her hands hard to her ears, trying desperately to make the noises go away.

'No...no...bad....go away...go away....GO AWAY!'

Terry twisting around at the terrified cry, her heart slamming against her ribs as she saw the door bowing under the blows, rushing forward and scooping the tiny girl into her arms, holding her tight as she sat them both down in a corner of the room, cradling her in her lap, rocking back and forth, shushing her gently, even as her hands trembled.

Terry's heart broke as she stared into her daughter's warm brown eyes that were shining with fear, wanting nothing more than to take her into her arms and hold her tight till the fear faded away, to tell her there was nothing to be afraid of. But she couldn't. Because monsters were real, and they were right behind their door.

'Shush...it's okay, baby...it's okay. It's going to be okay. I won't let them hurt you', she said, expression fierce as she held her tight, cupping her chubby face in her hands.

A flash of light shot across the room and the girl whimpered, letting out a tiny cry as her mother's hands tightened almost painfully. Terri shrunk further into the corner to hide them from sight, curving her body around her daughter's even as she squeezed her eyes shut for a long second, agony racing through her veins, every muscle in her body trembling with it.

No, it was too soon, she thought, hot tears piercing her eyes. She wasn't ready…. she wasn't ready to let go. To say goodbye. She was so little…only six years old. How could she send her out on her own?

But she had no choice. Not if she wanted to keep her out of their hands…. not if she wanted to save her.

'I need you to listen to me, baby, okay? Those men out there...they're not nice...they...they're bad. They....they want to hurt us...to take you away....'

'Open the door, Terry...' a cold voice suddenly came into the room, a voice that made the girl shrink into her Mama, her entire body suddenly going cold as she shuddered.

The voice…it sounded wrong. Cold, and hard and emotionless. He sounded mean...evil...like the men in the comic books and fairytales her Mommy read to her at night. The Bad Men.

Terry's hand tightened on her daughter's shoulder, looking straight into her eyes, holding her face gently, turning it so her eyes met hers.

'Shush, it's okay. Don't listen to him. Just look at me. I won't let them take you. I will never let them have you, I promise. But...I need you to do everything I say. We're...I'm going to have to leave you. I'm going to lead them away and I need you to run. Run as fast as you can to the train station in town...do you remember where that is?'

The little girl nodded, her lower lip trembling as tears began to run down her cheeks, her hands curling into the thin material of her Mama's nightgown.

'I 'member.... I don't wanna go, Mama...I want to stay with you.'

Terri's face crumpled at her words, the composed mask she had been struggling to hold in place shattering as she wrapped her arms around her, cupping her cheeks in her hands and brushing the wetness that clung to them away even as tears of her own began to roll down her cheeks, grief cutting through her.

'I know. I want that too. But... but we must be brave. Both of us. Can you do that for me? Can you be brave with me?'

The girl swallowed past the lump that had formed in her throat as she forced herself to nod, reaching up to wipe at her dripping nose with the back of her hand.

'I can be brave.'

'That's my girl,' she said, brushing back a stray curl that had escaped her beanie before pressing her lips to her forehead, squeezing her eyes shut, though hot tears continued to slide from behind her closed lids,

'When you get to the station, a man in a uniform will there, a man named Jones. He's the station master, and you can trust him. He knows what to do. Tell him your name, your real name, and he'll put you on a train to your uncle in the city. He'll be waiting for you. He'll keep you safe.'

The girl nodded, chin wobbling before she flung herself into her Mom's arms, her chubby arms clinging to her neck as she began to cry even harder, pressing her wet and sticky face to her throat, her body hiccupping against hers.

Terri clutched her closer, holding on so tight she was worried she'd leave bruises behind but she couldn't bring herself to loosen her hold, needing these few seconds to hold onto. She pressed her face into her daughter's soft hair, drawing the scent of her, the vanilla shampoo they'd washed her hair with that night and the baby powder that clung to her skin, into her lungs and memory, her stomach clenching as she felt how fragile and tiny she was in her arms, breath hitching as she bit back a sob.

'I'll find you. I promise. This won't be forever,' she whispered in her ear, kissing it gently, even as pain lanced through, knowing even as she spoke that every word was a lie. She already knew this would be the last time she would see her daughter... the last time she would hold her in her arms.

Terri pulled away reluctantly, dashing at her cheeks as she grabbed the packed bag from where she'd dropped it to the floor, her ears ringing with the pounding of the door, the chairs she had stacked in front of it vibrating and shifting forward with every bang. She ignored it, taking a deep breath and lifted her tiny daughter to her feet, tucking her precious stuffed lion inside the bag and zipping it closed before pulling the straps over her slight shoulders,.

The girl stumbled, the weight almost pulling her backwards onto the floor, eyes widening in surprise and fear, until her Mom reached out, steadying her gently with a trembling smile.

She pulled out the blanket that sat on the bottom of the closet and painstakingly rolled it until it took the shape of a small child, holding it to her chest as she walked slowly to the window, her finger to her

mouth telling her daughter to stay quiet. She peeked out, breath escaping in a relieved hiss as she saw no sign of the men and pushed the window open, flinching at every creak and groan as the wood shifted.

She slowly climbed out, shivering in the frigid air, before turning and lifting out her daughter, quickly tucking her under the house, knelling beside her and taking her hand, squeezing it gently.

Terri's chin wobbled, as she looked down at her baby, so tiny and painfully young in her jacket and pajamas, shivering in the winter air, her up-turned nose and cheeks flushed pink from the cold. Her eyes were large, dark and full of sadness and fear, and a sudden adult awareness that no child her age should have, the innocent belief in fairy-tales and happy endings shattered from this night. But she wasn't crying anymore, her eyes dry and steady, and Terri felt something shift inside her, muscles relaxing as a knowledge she didn't truly understand settled deep inside her.

Her daughter was so much braver and stronger than she'd ever been. Smart and good and kind. She was going to be okay. She would survive. Something inside her just knew she would. And suddenly…it was okay...she could let her go now.

'Keep quiet, baby. As soon as they're gone, you run. Just keeping going, no matter what you hear or see. Run as fast as you can and never look back'.

The little girl nodded shakily, her fingers tightening on her Mom's.

'I love you, Mama.'

Terri's face crumpled and she leant down to press a hard kiss to her head, her eyes running over her face, memorising it, trying to draw every tiny detail into her mind, like the freckle just behind her left ear, the sharpness of her chin, the wet press of her lips against her cheek, until it was all etched onto her mind forever. Something she could hold onto when the agony of losing her daughter took over.

'We will see each other again...' she said, not sure if she was trying to convince her or herself, blinking back the tears that burned at the

back of her eyes, her heart breaking as her little girl nodded, her trust in her, the trust she was going to have to break, snapping and splintering something inside her, something she knew would never heal.

Terry squeezed her eyes shut, biting back a sob that had her chest shuddering, leaning down to press one last kiss to her daughter's forehead, a wave of anguish rushing over her as she reluctantly let go of her hand, her fingers twitching on the empty air, already reaching for her. As she knew they always would.

'Goodbye', she gasped out, before scrambling to her feet, holding the bundle of blankets tight to her chest, her face contorting in pain as she took one step and then another until she was running, her breath shuddering with sobs.

She forced herself to keep her eyes forward, knowing if she took one look back, if she saw her so tiny and afraid, she'd never be able to leave her. And they would both be lost, prisoners to the evil men who masqueraded as scientists.

Please look after her, she begged silently, calling on whatever powers existed as she moved further and further away from her precious girl, as everything inside her screaming for her to turn around. To go back.

Keep her safe.

'Goodbye...Jane...' she whispered, breath rising in a white mist in front of her as she reached the edge of the clearing and disappeared into the forest.

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Jane Ives lay on her stomach in the dirt under the cabin, dust tickling her nose, and shivers wracking her tiny frame as she stared out into the darkness that surrounded her hiding spot, lips trembling as she let out a quiet whimper.

'Mama...' she whispered, almost believing that she would pop out of the woods where she'd disappeared like some magic trick by a

magician, smiling and saying it had all been a fun game and they could back inside and read The Frog Prince before bed.

She wiggled and fidgeted, sharp rocks and sticks digging through her jacket into her sides and legs, wiping at the snot that was dripping onto her lip with an impatient swipe. She began to move forward, inching her way out of the cramped space when the sound of heavy footsteps crunching towards her broke the silence, the sound so loud and angry, like the steps of a giant come to eat her....

Jane froze, her breath turning into shorts, panicked gasps as terror rose inside her, filling every inch of her until she could almost taste it, metallic and cold on her tongue, when four pairs of shoes moved in front of her hiding place, one pair inches from her face.

She pressed her hand to her mouth, smothering the cry that wanted to escape, barely able to hear over her own heart pounding in ears, drowning out every other sound.

'The woman was spotted heading South. The child is with her, sir', a deep voice said quickly, the feet in front of her eyes shifting nervously.

'She won't get far.'

Jane's throat clenched with fear as she recognised the voice from the house. The Bad Man. The one Mama said wanted to take her.

She squeezed her eyes shut, silent, dry sobs shaking her entire frame, as she desperately tried to stay very still, to become a statue like in that game her and Mommy had played once. She couldn't make a sound, she couldn't move. She had to be brave like Mommy asked.

She sagged against the ground as she finally felt the ground shift next to her, the crack and rustle of dried leaves and grass, and their harsh and cold voices, fading further and further away as they moved out into the forest towards her Mama..and away from her.

Her small fists curled into the dry grass beneath her as she lifted her head, ears straining for any noises, any sign the Bad Men were still there, but there was nothing. Nothing but the hoots of owls in the

distance and the scurrying of tiny woodland creatures in the bushes.

But she couldn't move, muscles twitching uselessly as she swallowed, her throat thick and tight with unshed tears.

I want Mama, she thought, sniffling as a single tear fell down her cheek, quickly followed by another. She wanted her Mama, wanted the lavender smell that always clung to her pretty coloured dresses and blouses, her brushing her hair at night, fingers gentle and soothing against her scalp, held safe in her arms at night, shushing her gently when she had a nightmare, or whispering made-up stories to her, telling her it was going to be okay.

But Mama wasn't there. Mama would never be there again.

It's okay, baby. I'm here....

The familiar voice slipped into her mind, making Jane's head snap up, her eyes wide and her breath hitching as she looked around frantically.

Mama!

But where was she?

I know you're scared, sweetie. But you have to move. You can do it, Jane. Just one foot in front of the other, she said, her voice sweet and encouraging, the same tone she'd used when Jane had been learning to walk, practicing for her first dance recital and when she'd taught her to use her special powers to float her toys in from her room, clapping and smiling proudly as Mr. Lion settled into her arms.

Jane swallowed hard, her fingers digging deep into the cold, hard dirt for grip as she wiggled out from under the house, shivering as the cold hit her full on.

Just one step...then another...keep going, baby...

She took one step, glancing nervously behind her before she burst out into a full run, her breath coming fast and heavy as she broke through the clearing and into the dark woods, leaving the cabin, leaving her home, behind forever.

Sticks and leaves crunched beneath her feet, the sound echoing loud, too loud, in the silent woods, making her flinch with every snap and shift. Sweat dripped down the back of her neck as she ran, every step feeling too slow, her legs like lead as she pushed and ducked through the trees, branches rearing back to scratch and scraped at any skin it could find.

Jane's eyes searched the darkness, her lungs screaming for air, tears blinding her as snot run down her lips, heart slamming hard against her ribs as the shadows suddenly changed shape, becoming the Bad Men, their dark eyes narrow and cruel, their hands shifting and reaching out for her, long fingers that would grab and pull her away into the heavy darkness.

She ran faster, her small legs pumping, the muscles trembling and burning as she forced herself to keep moving, even as she tripped every few steps, her thin slippers catching on every thorn and root. Tears ran down her cheeks, stinging the many scratches on her cheeks, mixing with the blood seeping from them, barely able to see through eyes that were hot and painfully swollen.

She finally stumbled out onto a road, resting her hands on her knees as she gasped for breath, her cheeks hot and flushed, every inch of trembling uncontrollably. She lifted slitted eyes to the sign that sat in front of her and felt relief and hope fill her tiny body, giving her the strength to rise to her feet.

Entering town limits. 2 miles.

I could get help, she thought, a trembling smile beginning to curve her lips, raising one foot to step forward. I could get someone big and they could go help Mama...they could bring her back...

A loud gun shot rang through the air, shattering the silence, and Jane froze as icy-cold terror unlike anything she'd ever felt before rushed through her, knocking the air from her lungs.

'Mama!' she screamed, the terrified sound vibrating the earth beneath her, branches snapping off the trees above it in the shockwave that followed, as something inside her snapped, shattering into tiny pieces.

She fell to the ground, her hands and knees scraping against the hard road as she landed but she barely felt it, the agony rippling through her overpowering everything else.

'Mama, Mama...' she screamed over and over, until the words stuttered off, her throat closing halfway through the word, scraping and throbbing painfully. But it was nothing compared to the horror spreading through her, anguished tears sliding unendingly down her cheeks, something inside her chest rippling agonisingly and splitting open, leaving her bare and broken.

'No...' she cried, slamming her fists into the ground over and over, not feeling as her knuckles split open, blood dripping over her hand and soaking into the sleeves of her jacket.

'Mama...' she gasped out, her face pressed to the cold rough ground, face sticky and wet with tears, the woods now horrifying silent.

Gone. Her Mama was gone. They'd hurt her...she'd felt it... Felt the link that had always been there...the thing that had connected Mama and her since she'd been a baby...born from the experiments that had forged the powers that she carried inside...crack and splinter into a million pieces.

Mama was gone. And she was alone.

Jane lay there, her eyes empty and blank, and waited. Waited for the Bad Men to find her, waiting as the cold seeped through her clothes and into her very bones, her body pulsing and aching like a bruise until she was sure a single touch would shatter her. Waited while the emptiness slowly inched its way through her until there was nothing...nothing but silence and a pain that would never fade away.

She couldn't leave. She couldn't go without Mama. She would stay here now, she thought, as her eyes began to close, the darkness of unconsciousness shimmering on the edge of her vision, come to take her away...

No!

Jane stiffened, pain and disbelief filling her as she lifted her head

painstakingly slowly, every muscle protesting the movement as she forced her gritty, swollen eyes open.

Mama. It was her Mama's voice, the painful echo of it settling into her mind, firm, strong and determined.

You will not give up. You hear me, Jane Elizabeth Ives? Get up, baby. Get up and keep moving. You promised me.

Jane's hands clenched into tiny fists as she lay there for a long second, wanting nothing more than to just stay there, to just fade away...but she knew she couldn't. She had to be brave. She had to keep going. She had promised. And Ives don't break promises.

She rose stiffly, to her feet, her nose dripping irritatingly with blood, and began to limp down the road, keeping her eyes forward, legs moving faster and faster until she was running again, even as tears ran down her cheeks and her small heart beat frantically in her chest, grief settling heavily inside her.

Go Jane. Run. Just keep going. Run!

And she did. She just kept running. And she never looked back.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey guys! OMG, thank you so much for your response to this story so far!!! I have been feeling so down about my writing lately and struggling a lot to get even a few words down so to hear you loved it has made me so happy! So...since I'm (very slowly) making headway on the next chapter, I thought I'd upload the one I've already finished :D

Nineteen-year old Mike Wheeler jerked awake, sheets tangled and sticking to his sweaty and grim-coated body, as he let out a loud groan, head throbbing painfully as he gingerly sat up.

His lips curled down into a disgusted grimace as he swallowed, his mouth feeling like something furry had crawled inside it during the night and died, his head seeming to pulse with every tiny move he made.

'What the hell?' he muttered under his breath as he buried his face in his pillow, trying desperately to block out the sunlight that seemed to beam straight into his eyes, as if it was trying to punish him. But for what? He hadn't done anything...right?

He reluctantly opened one slitted eye and glanced around anxiously, breathing a quiet sigh of relief as he saw he was in his tiny-dorm room, everything the same he'd left it the night, his textbooks scattered around the small desk, clothes hanging out of the open drawers of his cupboard in a way that would've given his mother a heart attack. Everything the way it should be....so why did he feel like he was missing something? Something urgent...that flickered across his mind, a ghost of a thought that faded away again before he could catch it...something that made his heart speed up in his chest...something important.

This doesn't make sense, he thought, running a hand over his face, feeling exhaustion beat at him as his stomach churned and wringed itself horribly, bile rising in his throat so quickly he barely had time

to swallow it back down, flat-out refusing to be sick. What the hell happened last night?

He kicked his sheets off, moaning as the cool air that blew through the open window washed over his sweaty, over-heated body, his fuzzy mind straining to remember something...anything!...that had happened the night before. But there was nothing...the night a messy, indistinct blur that stayed just out of his reach, no matter how he tried to bring it into focus, dull pain pulsing behind his eyes for the effort.

Lucas and Dustin, his friend's ever since elementary school, had come to his room the night before and forced him to come with them to a party at one of the fraternities on campus, ignoring all his excuses and protests and threats ('I don't want to....I have an assessment due in a few days....guys seriously....let go or I swear to god!'), practically dragging him out of the room by his shirt.

Their other friend, Will, had managed to escape their evil clutches because of an art project due the next day ('Lucky bastard', he'd muttered under his breath as he'd walked inside the frat house, crossing his arms over his chest childishly). He remembered walking in, standing around awkwardly while Lucas had wandered off somewhere, chatting with a red-head he seemed to know and who looked vaguely familiar, while Dustin had disappeared as well, going to find the biology major he'd had his eye on for a weeks. Abandoned, he'd walked over to grab a drink from the punch bowl, refilling it a couple of times out of sheer boredom and then...nothing.

There was nothing after that moment...just a messy, blank blur of images that didn't make sense. Except for one thing that stood out from the rest of it. A pair of wide brown eyes...eyes that were soft and kind, mesmerising and bright as they smiled at him, as they seemed to look into his very soul...even only in his memories.

How the hell did this happen? Do I have amnesia? Was I in some horrible accident and have memory loss? he thought, his breath hitching and speeding up until it came in panicked gasps, heart beginning to pound in his chest. How the hell was he supposed to figure out what happ-

The quiet rustle of bedsheets and dipping of the mattress as something shifted beside him made Mike freeze, his muscles locking together in surprise for a second before his body snapped up, so fast he was distantly surprised he didn't get whiplash. He barely noticed the way his head pulsed at the abrupt movement, his eyes popping wide, as he gaped down at what lay beside him.

Or...more accurately...who lay beside him.

A tiny girl was curled at his side, her wild tumble of brown curls, the curve of her cheek and the sharp point of her chin the only parts of her that were visible over the pile of blankets she lay beneath. Her lashes fluttered every few seconds, her fingers twitching and curling around the blanket as she seemed to fight against waking, nuzzling into the pillow with a slight grimace.

Mike stared at her for a few minutes, still gaping as his mind raced frantically, disbelief filling him as it tried...and failed...to comprehend what he was seeing,

There was a girl in his bed. There was a girl....in his bed. There was A GIRL in HIS bed. Holy shit!

What the actual hell happened last night? Who was she? Why was she here? Oh wait...oh shit...they didn't...did they? Please no...no, no, no, no...

Mike swallowed hard, holding his breath as he slowly lifted the sheets from his body and almost choked with relief when he found himself still fully clothed, the same jeans and striped blue and green shirt he'd been wearing the night before adorning his body.

Oh, thank god, he thought, his panic fading slightly, replaced with almost staggering relief as he sagged against the bed-head, burying his hands in his hair. How would he have explained to a girl he'd slept with that he couldn't remember her name? he thought, shuddering in horror at the very thought, swallowing back a second round of nausea.

Nope...there was no way he could have handled that. He was not that guy, the one able to charm girls in and out of his bed, without a

single thought or an ounce of guilt. His Mom had raised him better than that, to treat girls with respect at all times and anyway...it just wasn't remotely possible. He could barely talk to girls. He had always gotten tongue-tied and nervous whenever he tried, unable to get more than a few stammered words out before his face would go bright red and the urge to runaway would overwhelm him. It had made it impossible for him to get a date all through high school....and was a fact that made what he was seeing in front of his very eyes even more mind-blowing.

How had this girl ended up in his bed in the first place? How had he, Mike Wheeler, gotten a girl to stay in his dorm room?

Whatever way that had happened...at least he didn't have to have that mortifying conversation. He didn't think he could ever forgive himself for hurting a girl like that. And he knew that he definitely would never be able to do that to Her.

Mike froze as the thought flitted through his mind, the certainty in it leaving him stunned, turning his wide eyes to peer down at the still sleeping girl.

Where had that thought come from? Who was this girl? And why did the thought of hurting her...even in any tiny way...cause panic to stir to life inside his chest? Did she...she meant something to him, he realised, bewildered, eyebrows drawing together in confusion as he stared blankly at her. But why? What could have possibly have happened last night to make him feel this way about her?

Mike jumped, scrambling back slightly, dragged abruptly from his thoughts, as the girl suddenly shifted again, letting out a quiet groan as she began to wiggle into consciousness, her eyes slowly beginning to flutter open.

Well, Wheeler, it looks like you're about to find out, he thought, shaking his leg anxiously as waited for her to turn towards him. As he waited for her to speak, something clicked inside him, something that made him sit up straighter, that told him to pay attention, because it somehow knew that this moment...that this girl...for whatever reason...was going to change something.
Maybe forever.

Eighteen-year old El Ives reluctantly drifted into consciousness, muttering and groaning irritably under her breath as she pushed herself up onto her elbow, feeling like she'd barely slept the entire night, her body aching and stiff, eyes heavy with sleep.

She reached up to push back the heavy fall of curls that fell into her eyes, letting out an annoyed and mortified groan as she felt the way they were sticking up in all directions, a look she knew made her look like some sort of irritated porcupine.

Ugh, I hate mornings, she thought, opening her eyes for a second before she quickly closed them again, wincing at the bright morning light that shone through the blinds over the window, blinding her. Why are they even a thing?

She dropped her head back onto the pillow with a muffled thump, arms and legs heavy with exhaustion as she tried to find the energy to get up and go to class, slowly opening her eyes again to glance at her alarm clock on the bed-side table.
She paused, eyebrows drawing together into a delicate frown as, instead of her scratched up wooden table, her eyes drifted upwards to meet the familiar dark eyes of the boy hovering above her, staring down at her, his floppy black hair sticking up all over the place, freckles dark flecks against his pale skin, looking rumpled and unfairly handsome in the clothes he'd worn the night before. She smiled, snuggling back down into the covers, as she remembered where she was...and who she was with.

Mike. The boy she had met this night before...the most romantic night of her life. The boy who had made her smile and laugh more than she could ever remember doing since she was a child, whose gentle touch as her took her hand made her breath hitch, and whose soft, crooked smile made her heart flutter peculiarly, too fast and skippy, in a way no other boy ever had. The boy who had spun her around under the stars, who had shared his favourite ice-cream with her... and the first boy...person really...she had ever felt safe enough to fall asleep beside. Even after only knowing him a few hours.

'Morning,' she said, her voice quiet and scratchy with sleep, letting out a soft sigh as she happily breathed in the sweet smell that clung to the sheets.

'Uh...morning?', Mike said slowly, bewilderment coating every word as he stared down at her, face scrunched up in confusion.

Everything inside El went still as she heard something in his voice...something off...suddenly feeling wide awake. She quickly pushed herself up until she was sitting beside him, eyebrows creasing together into frown as she studied him.

'Is everything okay? You're acting...weird,' she said, tone perplexed, tilting her head to the side, squinting at him slightly.

Mike's mouth opened and closed for a few seconds, unable to get any words out as he squirmed under her intense gaze, unsure what to say or do as they stared at each for a long moment. He felt strangely exposed, like this girl could read his every thought, like she knew every secret he'd ever had and could see straight into every part of him. But that was stupid...no-one could read minds or have superpowers like that, he thought, inwardly rolling his eyes at himself and what his Mom had always fondly called his over-active imagination.

El bit her lip, her eyes on his as she shifted in closer, keeping every movement careful and slow, sensing that if she did something wrong, he would bolt. What was going on? Why was he looking at her like that? Was he still sick?

Her eyes widened at the thought and she quickly scooted in closer, rising up on her knees in front of him and lifting her hand to press it to his forehead gently, a worried frown pulling down the corner of her lips.

'Oh god, I should have thought...are you still not feeling okay? Are you going to be sick again?

Mike blanched as her words registered, feeling the heat rush to his cheeks as he let out an embarrassed groan, barely holding back the urge to bury his entire body under the covers and never come out again.

Sick again? God, he'd been sick in front of her last night? Mike thought, squeezing his eyes shut and letting out another mortified

moan. First amnesia, now this? Could this day get any worse?

El flicked a glance up at him, her lip twitching up as she tried to hold back the giggle that threatened to bubble up at his horrified expression, cheeks bright red, eyes shut and mouth folded down into a grimace.

She jumped when his eyes suddenly opened again, leaning back slightly when he looked at her, eyes narrowed as he cocked his head to the side. As if trying to figure her out. Her heart clenched for a second, racing so fast she felt dizzy with it, before she quickly dragged her eyes from his, clearing her throat as she felt heat fill her own cheeks, until they were bright pink.

Mike shifted awkwardly on the bed, surprised and confused by the butterflies that had erupted in his stomach when their eyes had met, unable to tear his gaze away from her as she focused on testing his temperature, her nose crinkling in a way he couldn't help but find adorable, something inside his chest softening at the sight.

She's so beautiful, he thought as his eyes roved over her face, jumping slightly as the realisation hit him. He hadn't noticed before in all the confusion and panic. Her hair was a halo of brown curls that seemed to have a mind of their own, tumbling down her back in a messy disarray and looked so soft he had to resist the urge to touch one, just to see for himself. Her eyes, the only thing he could properly remember from the night before, were the loveliest he'd ever seen, a honey-brown the exact shade of the syrup he put on his eggs in the morning that seemed to glow with warmth even as they were squinted with concern. Her face was a mixture of softness and sharp edges that really shouldn't have fit together but were somehow the perfect combination, with full cheeks, pouty lips, a sharp chin and a pert up-turned nose which was sprinkled with a smattering of freckles.

El's frown relaxed as she let out a relieved sigh, pulling her hand away as she lifted her warm brown eyes to meet his again.

'Everything looks good. Must have got it all out of your system last night, though I'm not surprise with all the vomiting you did,' she joked with a quiet laugh, a half-smile curving at the corner of her

lips.

The smile faltered when she saw the way he was still looking at her, half-bewildered, half-awed, as if he'd never seen her before.
Like she was a complete stranger.

She swallowed hard, something slimy and cold settling at the bottom of her stomach, her throat clenching as an uneasy feeling filled her, overriding everything else. Something was wrong. She just knew it.

'Seriously, are you okay? What's wrong?' she asked, her voice shaking slightly with nerves as she shifted anxiously, unconsciously holding her breath as she waited for him to speak.

'Uh....who are you?' Mike blurted out, the words bursting from his mouth before he could pull them back. He flinched, cringing at how abrupt and harsh they sounded, barely resisting the urge to slap himself on the head, swearing under his breath.

Great. Just freaking great, Wheeler. Way to break it to the girl easily, he thought, shaking his head at himself. Idiot!

El’s breath hissed out in shock as she stared at him, agony and hurt slashing through her chest, so painful and unexpected it knocked the breath from her lungs. Her fingers clenched in the sheets below her, nails digging deep into her palms as it settled deep in her stomach, churning nauseously.

Oh...oh ow, she thought, inwardly wincing as her face crumpled slightly, irrational hot tears stinging at the back of her eyes. Her vision blurred, his face going misty in front of her before she quickly turned away, choking back the dry sob that threatened to slip from between her lips, desperately trying to hide her reaction from him.

God, you're so stupid, El Ives, she thought, reaching up to dash at one of the tears that had slipped down her cheek, letting out a shuddering breath as she silently scolded herself, wrapping her arms around her knees.

She wasn't sure why she was so hurt. He'd been pretty drunk the night before, and it wasn't his fault he couldn’t remember. Not at all.

But it did. It hurt so badly she almost couldn't breathe from it, her insides aching with it, seeming to pulse and echo with the words repeating inside her head.

Who are you? Who are you? Who are you?

He didn't remember. Everything that had happened the night...how'd they met...everything they had spoken about...everything
that they had done and shared...he didn't remember any of it.

He didn't remember her.

She shook her head, forcing the thoughts back as she pressed her lips together hard to stop them from trembling, blinking back the tears that still threatened to spill over.

Mike's stomach dropped, panic shooting through his veins as he watched her face drain off all colour, going an almost sickening white as hurt filled her eyes, darkening them for a second before she turned away, staring down at the bedspread. She was clearly trying to hide her face from him, her chin wobbling slightly as her shoulders stiffened, tightening until they were up around her ears, as if his words were a physical blow, the sight making his stomach clench.

'Oh shit...I'm sorry...I didn't mean to upset you...' he said, shaking his head frantically, as he reached out for her, his fingers inches from her shoulder before he quickly yanked them back, staring down at them in complete bewilderment.

What the hell, Wheeler? You can't just go around touching her. What is going on with you? You don't even know this girl. You're a stranger to her.

Or was he? he wondered, stunned by the need that had roared through him only seconds before, the need to comfort and protect, the urge so overwhelming and strong he had to curl his hands into fists on the bed to keep from reaching for her again.

Who was this girl? Why was he having this reaction to her? What the hell had gone on between them last night to make him feel this way about her? He obviously meant something to her as well or she

wouldn't be so hurt that he couldn't remember her. What was he missing?

El sniffled quietly, finally managing to force the tears back and took a deep breath, rubbing her wet cheek against her knee.

Come on, Ives, get it together, she thought, looking up at from where she rested her head on her knee, giving a forced, strained smile that left her face feeling stiff and tight.

She knew her smile wasn't fooling either of them when his lips immediately twisted down in concern when she turned back, his dark eyes searching hers, face softening as he looked at her, making her heart clench.

Mike ignored the voice inside telling him to stop, that he was going to freak her out, and finally reached out, his fingers brushing her knee, rubbing comforting circles on her warm skin.

'Are you okay?' he asked, voice soft and hesitant.

Ugh....why did he have to be so sweet...so perfect? It only made things so much worse...god, she was so screwed!

El shrugged dejectedly, one side of her mouth turning up with the gesture.

'Yeah, I'm okay. Just a bit of a shock I guess but of course you wouldn't...' she trailed off, swallowing past the lump that had formed in her throat, lip twitching up into a sad smile, 'I'm El. We met last night at the frat party? I was leaving, cause my room-mate completely bailed on me and didn't bother to show...but that's not the point...and you were....'

'Ow,' Mike muttered irritably as his shoulder slammed into another doorway, his head spinning dizzily as he swayed and stumbled his way to the front door, blinking slowly to try and clear the fuzzy haze over his eyes.

Ugh...what was happening? he thought, confusion slowly trickling into his suddenly groggy mind, face twisting up into a frown.

He felt...weird. His head was strangely light, flopping all over the place, and his legs didn't seem to want to do what they were supposed to be, wobbling and weak like what he imagined a baby deer would be. He barely managed to catch himself as he stumbled again, finally making it out into the warm spring air, letting out a quiet sigh as he went to lean against the wall, reaching up to rub at his face.

But the wall suddenly wasn't there, and he was falling, eyes popping wide in panic, his heart jolting, as his arms flailed through the empty air, trying to find something to hold onto, to steady himself. His hand finally grasped something soft and flimsy, hearing a quiet gasp as his fingers tightened on it panickily, before he hit the floor, dragging whatever it was down with him.

He landed hard on his back on the porch, the air rushing from his lungs at the impact, leaving him gasping, his breath hissing out in pained wheeze as he suddenly felt the dull, pulsing pain at the back of his head from where he'd struck the hard ground below.

He squeezed his eyes shut, groaning, as he desperately tried to get his lungs to work again, drawing in a short breath and then another until he felt the blissful feeling of air refilling his lungs, slumping against the ground.

'Whoa! Hey, are you okay?' a soft voice suddenly asked beside him, voice frantic as hands were suddenly shaking him. 'Oh please please don't be knocked out. There is no way I can carry you...you're freaking huge...come on, dude, wake up...'

Mike frown, slowly opening his eyes and blinking to find a girl hovered over him, her brown eyes wide with worry and panic as she knelt beside him, chewing her lip nervously. She sagged with relief as his eyes met hers, the worry fading from her face as she run a hand over her forehead in a 'phew' gesture.

'Oh thank god You scared the crap out of me,' she said, pushing her curls back from her face before she reached down and grabbed his arm, pulling him upright.

His head protested the movement, spinning dizzily for a second as he braced a hand on the floor with a groan, rubbing at his eyes as he

desperately tried to blink everything into focus. His fingers twitched on the flimsy material in his hand, and he jerkily turned his head to stare uncomprehendingly down at the pretty blue material clutched in his palm, the material that was attached to the arm of the girl sitting in front of him, her expression quickly growing amused, lips twitching up into a grin as she raised her eyebrows at him.

Oh! he realised after a few seconds that felt like eternity, the information finally clicking into place in his sluggish mind. It had been her! It was her sleeve that he had grabbed on the way down. He had pulled her down with him.

He flushed as he quickly let go of her dress, the heat rushing to his already bright red cheeks making him look like an embarrassed tomato, his embarrassment only growing when he noticed the blood seeping from the cuts on her knees from where she fell as she pulled her flowy skirt down over her legs.

'I'm so sorry...I didn't mean...the wall was there and then...poof gone...and now you're bleeding...where did the wall go...' he muttered, frowning for a second before he turned to glare at it, sure it was the culprit.

The girl laughed, shaking her head at him as she reached out to pat his hand, dragging his eyes back to her.

'Don't worry. I've had worse. Trust me,' she said, something shifting behind her eyes, something that made them grow dark and sad for second before she shook her head again, as if shaking some thought away, turning back to smile at him.

'How's your head? You hit it pretty damn hard just now.'

Mike leant back to stare into her face as she ducked down, her hands touching the back of his head gingerly, her eyes squinted slightly in concern, and felt a goofy grin spreading across his face.

'Hey...you're pretty. Like really pretty. You look like an angel...or a fairy...', he said, reaching out slowly to play with the ends of her curls, expression fascinated as they twisted around his fingers, as if they had a life of their own.

The girl blinked at him, tilting her head to the side slowly as she gave him a confused look, eyebrows drawing together.

'Uh...thank you?' she said, slowly, eyes growing bright with unshed laughter.

'You're welcome,' he said, nodding, expression proud.

Her frown faded, a grin suddenly stretched across the girl's face as her eyes widened, realisation dawning on her face.

'Oh my god,' the girl laughed, stretching her legs out in front of her and leaning back on her elbows, ignoring the people that stepped over them, shooting them weird looks as they walked into the party that was still going on in full-force behind them, laughter and loud music drifting out of the open door and windows, 'You're drunk? How much have you had to drink?'

Mike shook his head, pouting slightly as he tried to speak, struggling to keep his thoughts straight. He pushed himself up onto his elbow to face her, but quickly slide back down, his head thumping lightly against the floor again as he blinked up at the ceiling, surprised to find himself there.

Huh. Well...floor was better anyway...floor wasn't so...spinny. Floor was good. He liked floor.

He threw his head back to look at the girl who was watching him with a wide smile, leaning her chin against one hand as she waited expectantly for him to speak.

Wait...what were they talking about again? Oh right...

'Not drunk.... can't be...only had punch'.

The girl huffed out another laugh, pressing her lips together as she shot a quick glance back into the party, seeing the bright blue punch that was sitting on the side tables near the dance floor.

'Oh boy. And how many glasses of punch did you have?'

Mike frowned, concentrating hard, trying to think back....

'Four.'

'Well, you're definitely going to have a fun morning tomorrow,' she said, tone amused, before turning her head to look at him full on, tilting her head at him curiously. 'So what's your name, punch-boy?'

'Mike...Mikey...Michael Wheel....ser....'

She slapped a hand to her mouth to smother her giggle at the triumphant look on his face, laying down beside him and nudging his shoulder with hers.

'Well, it's nice to meet you, Mike. I'm El. El Ives.'

Mike blinked, dazed as the girl's, as El's, voice flitted across his mind, the memory fading as quickly as it had come, leaving him feeling more lost than before.

They had met last night...literally ran into each other like in one of those romantic films his sister Nancy had forced him to watch as kids...his heart racing at the memory of it, palms sweaty as he flicked a quick glance at her, cheeks growing warm as he remembered the way her smile had lit up her face as she'd laughed at him.

But it still didn't answer why he couldn't remember more than that. What had happened? She seemed to know something he didn't, from the amused look she had shot him when he'd spoken about the punch last night. So many questions were rushing through his mind it left him slightly dizzy. He needed answers.

El shifted anxiously on the bed as she waited for him to speak, shoulders tightening more and more as the silence stretched between them, nerves settling in her stomach and twisting her insides uncomfortably. When he still continued to stare into space, lost in his own thoughts, she sighed, a pang in her chest as she reluctantly began to inch off the bed.

It was obviously time to go. He clearly didn't remember her....and he clearly didn't want her there. He was just too nice to say it and it was getting beyond awkward now. Time to say goodbye and just try to forget the most perfect night of her life ever happened.

Yeah, a doubtful voice scoffed inside her mind, I'm sure that'll be really easy.

'Look...I'm just going to go,' El said, lowering one leg down to the floor as she gave an awkward wave, keeping her eyes averted to hide the hurt and disappointment she was sure was shining in them, rising to walk towards the door, barely resisting the urge to look back.

Pathetic, El. Just pathetic, she inwardly groaned.

Mike's head snapped up, shaking his head frantically. Panic rose in his throat, almost choking him, at the thought of her leaving. Of never learning what happened last night...and, worse, never seeing her again.

'No, don't,' he yelled, reaching out and catching her hand in his, tugging her to an abrupt stop.

El jumped, startled, her pulse jumping beneath the thin skin of her wrist as his fingers curled around it gently, before turning wide, surprised eyes to his. She raised her eyebrows at him questioningly as he just sat there for a minute, mouth opening and closing as he silently begged for words, any words ('Come on Wheeler, speak!') to come out.

Her lips quirked up into a small half-smile as colour filled his cheeks, warmth rushing into chest at the adorable sight, the panic and desperation in his eyes that seemed to almost beg her to understand what he was trying to say, causing hope to rise inside her.

Could he...could he want her to stay...?

Mike groaned internally as he felt blood rushing to his cheeks, but kept his eyes on hers, giving what he hoped was a winning smile, but he knew probably just looked like a awkward, pained grimace.

'Don't go...I mean....I won't make you stay...not if you don't want to...but if you do want to...' he snapped his mouth shut, cutting off the babbling words with a barely muffled groan as he saw her eyebrows drawing together deeper and deeper in confusion, and took a deep breath.

'Your name is El Ives. We met last night when I knocked you over trying to leave the party? On the porch?'

El's face lit up, nodding quickly and shifting closer towards him as a wide, excited smile stretched her lips, so bright and warm and beautiful it made his breath hitch, leaving him staring at her breathless and dazed for a few seconds.

'That's right. You remembered?' El said, relief rushing through her as her eyes searched his for a long moment.

Mike hesitated before nodding slowly.

'Not all of it. I just remember meeting you. Everything else is kind of a blur. But...I'd still like you to stay', he said, voice soft, his smile crooked, tugging gently on her arm to move her back towards the bed. ‘If you want to, that is.’

El's eyes searched his for a long moment, a considering look on her face before she nodded, settling back on the bed cross-legged, her eyes dipping briefly to where his fingers were still curled around her wrist, his thumb absent-mindedly drawing circles on the thin skin at her wrist, before lifting away, giving him a small smile.

'I'd like to stay. As long as you're sure...'

Mike nodded quickly, letting go off her arm and twisting his body around to face her, mimicking her cross-legged pose. They sat in silence for a few minutes, both desperately trying to find something to say, shifting and looking around awkwardly, exchanging nervous smiles.

Mike rubbed at the back of his neck anxiously, letting out a deep sigh before lifting his eyes to hers, finding her watching him silently, head tilted to the side, expression thoughtful.

'I'm...ah...I'm Mike by the way...'

Warmth filled her honey brown eyes as she suddenly grinned at him, somehow making them even brighter, shaking her head as she shifted, nudging his knee with hers.

'I remember. Mike Wheelser, wasn't it?' she said, letting out a quick laugh as he flushed even redder, his expression horrified, 'I'm guessing that's not your real name.'

'No, no it's Wheeler. Mike Wheeler'

'Well, Wheeler, do you mind if I check you out?'

Mike blinked at her for a long moment, stunned, before amusement filled him, silently raising his eyebrows, lips curling up into an amused grin as she made a quiet squeak, cheeks going a light pink, as she realised what she'd just said.

'That's not what I...oh shut up,' she huffed, crossing her arms over her chest as his grin only grew bigger, reaching back to hit him with a pillow, making him burst out laughing, 'I meant medically, you perve. Not...not that! You were really sick last night and I just want to be sure you don't need to see a doctor.'

'Yeah sure. Go…go ahead,' he said quickly, clearing his throat and grimacing at how eager he sounded.

El smiled at him, reaching across and took his hand with gentle hands that were cooler than he expected, making him jump slightly. She let out a quiet giggle at that, before quickly and efficiently going to work, checking his eyes, making him tilt his face towards the sunlight filtering through the blinds to look at his pupils, before checking his pulse as she asked him what seemed to be a never-ending list of questions.

Did his head hurt? Any muscle aches? What was the last thing he remembered?

'Uh...before meeting you? Just walking in with my friends and getting a cup of punch. After that, nothing really,' he told her, watching curiously as she bent over his wrist, impatiently pushing back a stray curl that fell into her face, her fingers pressed to his pulse, her lips moving as she counted silently. 'You seem to know a lot about this stuff. Are you a nurse or something?'

'Trying to be,' she laughed, shrugging her shoulders as she set his arm

down, settling back comfortably on her elbows as she looked at him, 'I'm only in my second year so I still have a while to go before I can call myself a nurse. Okay...well the good news is you look good. Better than last night anyways, but trust me that's not hard. Your pulse is stronger, it doesn't look like you'll be puking again any time soon and your pupils don't look something out of an alien flick anymore so bonus.'

'Wait, what? Seriously?' he asked, eyes popping wide, glancing quickly into the mirror over his dresser to check his eyes, slightly horrified by the image that popped into his mind at her words.

El nodded, giving an exaggerated shudder that made Mike laugh.

'Afraid so. They were pretty creepy.'

'But...I don't understand. What happened to me last night? How did I end up...like...whatever that was? I couldn't have been drunk. All I had was punch. Why do I feel like this? Why can't I remember anything? ?' he groaned, rubbing at the headache that had begun to fade but was now back with full force, pounding painfully behind his eyes,

Why can't I remember meeting you? he asked silently, desperately wanting...no needing an answer.

He just didn't understand it. There was no possible way he could have ever forgotten her. Not willingly. Even from just the short memory he had of her the night before and speaking to her now, he knew that she was sweet, smart and funny, and had been kind and selfless enough to spend the whole night looking after a sick guy she didn't even know. And...she actually seemed to like him. Him, Mike Wheeler, who hadn't gotten a single date throughout high school, who had always been written off as the nerdy AV guy.

No, something must have happened to make him forget her. He was sure of it.

'So....about that. At most frat parties...not to say I've been to many...but in my limited experience I've found that the punch is usually spiked,' she said slowly, pressing her lips together to keep

from laughing at his gaping expression, which quickly scrunched up into annoyance groaning loudly as he buried his face in his hands.

'Ugh...of course it would be. No wonder it tasted weird. I'm such a dumbass,' he muttered, wanting nothing more than to smack his head against the wall, beyond irritated with himself.

El's face softened at his dejected tone, and reached over, tugging his hands away from his face so he'd look at her.

'No, you're not. That was the first fraternity party you'd been to right?' she asked, smiling softly as he nodded, expression miserable, 'So how could you have known? Trust me, we've all been there? And that stuff is lethal. I swear I've seen them put three bottles of vodka in one. So don't feel bad.'

Mike grimaced, trying to make the mortified heat in his cheeks fade away as he hid his face again, peeking out at her through his fingers.

'So what happened after that?'

She shrugged.

'Not much. We walked around for a while to sober you up. Got some ice-cream and then I took you back home. No biggie.'

The nonchalant words, however, didn't match the way her face seemed to soften, expression growing wistful and faraway, a small smile curving her lips, and Mike was suddenly certain there was something she wasn't telling him, something that had happened between them last night but he couldn't seem to focus on it, to try and get it out of her. No, he was too distracted by the alarm quickly filling him at the information she'd just revealed, gawking as he tried to swallow and speak at the same time, choking and spluttering the words out.

'Wait...you took me to my room....alone? Do you know how dangerous that is? I could have been some psycho? I could have tried to hurt you.'

El raised her eyebrows a notch, a small snort slipping out.

'I think I could have taken you,' she said, the smug look on her face and the amused tone making him frown slightly, face creased with confusion, sure he was missing something. Like she was telling a joke but he just wasn't getting the punch-line.

He shot her a nervous look, biting the inside of his cheek before he forced him to ask the question repeating over and over in his mind.

'But...I...uh...didn't say or do anything...like embarrassing did I?'

She bit her lip hard to keep the grin she was barely holding back from her spreading across her cheeks at the dreading expression on her face, putting on a mock-thoughtful look.

'Hm...well, we did spend quite a few hours together in the bathroom while you puked. I held back your hair. It was quite....an experience. And you told me I was the prettiest girl you'd ever meet...quite a few times actually.'

Mike groaned, ducking his head down letting his hair falling into his face, feeling his cheeks beginning to burn.
So he had been sick in front of her. God, he must've sounded like such a complete dork, prattling on about how pretty she was all night. She probably thought he was a total moron and he honestly didn't blame her. There was no way this day could get any worse. He'd definitely ruined any chance he had with her.

If you could just open up the floor and swallow me up that would be great thanks, he called out silently, begging whatever powers were there to help him out, letting out another mortified moan as he sadly remained seated on the bed, staring down at the bedspread, plucking at it so he didn't have to meet her eyes.

El's lips twisted down, guilt rising inside her, settling thickly in her stomach, as she watched him fidget on the bed, clearly avoiding her eyes as he ducked his head down almost into his chest, hiding behind his thick black hair.

You can be a real jerk sometimes, El Ives, she silently scolded herself. He's obviously embarrassed about everything that had happened and you go and tease him about it? Real smart.

But she didn't understand why he was so embarrassed. None of this was his fault, and what he had said to her...well...

She scooted forward so she was closer to him, reaching and gently touching his arm, leaning down to try to meet his eyes, following him as he tried to turn his head away.

'Mike...', she said, tugging on his arm gently, her eyes moving over his face, 'please don't be embarrassed. Really? I'm going to be a nurse. I've seen people be sick before...and the other thing...what you said...it was the loveliest thing a guy has ever said to me.'
Mike's started, his head snapping up so fast she quickly pulled back to avoid their heads smashing together, his jaw dropping in disbelief at her words.

How could no-one have ever told her she was pretty? Where they blind?

He went to say just that but the words stuttered off in his throat, his entire body jerking slightly as he realised how close their faces were, so close her breath was fanning across his face, inhaling sharply in surprise.

El stilled, her eyes dropping to his lips before a second before they quickly darted back up, lips parting slightly as she watched his eyes darken with a sudden awareness that made her stomach clench. She licked her suddenly dry lips, heart racing in her chest as she slowly leant forward, finding it hard to breathe.

Mike swallowed hard, his lips trembling open with nerves, before he followed her lead, moving in closer as well, his hand slowly reaching up to cup her cheek gently as his mouth softly, hesitantly, brushed against hers.

She let out a quiet shudder, her fingers running up his shoulders slowly to curl into the soft hair at the back of his neck, shifting up on her knees so she could press her lips more firmly to his, growing more confident with every touch.

Mike groaned at the taste of her, his eyes sliding shut as one hand came down to rest on her waist, the other burrowing into her thick,

soft curls as they kissed, sweet and tentative, as they learnt each other. A soft keening noise escaped him, something that would have embarrassed him any other time but he really couldn't bring himself to care in that moment, not with her sighing against his mouth, kissing him back just as eagerly.

They pulled away after a few minutes, staring at each other, eyes dark and dazed as they panted, trying to catch their breath. A pleasant warmth spread through El's body as she took in his stunned expression, her head spinning giddily as she rubbed her lips together, smiling as she felt the heated imprint of his lips lingering against her own.

'I was wondering what that would be like all night', she confessed, voice quiet and almost reverant in the sudden quiet.

'And?' he asked, shooting her a quick, searching look, his insides quivering as he held his breath, anxiously waiting for her answer.

What if she hadn't liked it? What if she wanted him to leave? God, had he just embarrassed himself? Again?

El bit her lip, heat rushing to her cheeks at his cheeks, unaware of his anxiousness and gave a quiet smile, ducking her head slightly.

'It was even better than I imagined.'

Mike felt his lips pulling up into an uncontrollable grin, barely holding back the urge to fist-pump the air like some dork in a romance flick, feeling giddiness rising in him, the butterflies and anxiousness that had seemed to be rioting in his stomach fading completely.

She liked it! She liked kissing him, he thought, unable to get the grin off his face as he reached out, brushing a curl back from her face, his thumb caressing her cheekbone gently.

'I liked it too.'

El leant into his touch, her smile lighting up her face, opening her mouth to speak before she abruptly scrambled back, her eyes going wide as she noticed the time on the clock on his wall, a panicked

croak falling from her lips.

'Oh, crap, is that the time?'

Mike blinked, confused by the abrupt change of conversation and glanced over at the clock, nodding in confirmation. He jumped when she scrambled back from him and off the bed, tugging at her short curls panickily as she frantically searched the floor for her shoes.

'Oh my god...I'm so late. My class started five minutes ago. Shit...shit...shit...', she muttered, letting out a triumphant 'ah-hah!' as she founded her shoes tucked under the bottom of the bed, tugging on the battered doc martins before glancing down at her body, letting out a loud groan as she saw she was still in the dress she was wearing last night and swung towards him.

'Can I borrow some clothes? I can't go to class in this...' she said, her eyes wide and begging, shuffling on her feet anxiously.

'Yeah...sure...' Mike said, leaning back against the bed-head, arms crossed over his chest, slightly amused as she scrambled around, picking up clothes from his floor and discarding them behind her as she tried to find something that would fit. It was the first time he'd seen her this flustered and he couldn't help but find the way she muttered curse words under her breath, out of breath and annoyed, completely cute.

His amusement quickly faded as she stood again, a pair of sweats and a striped red and blue shirt in one hands, and reached down to tug her dress up and over her head, leaving her in nothing but a pair of black underwear and bright blue bra.

He choked on his saliva, coughing to try and clear it, breath coming fast as he gaped at her, unable to believe what he was seeing.
She was tiny, everything about her seeming fragile, delicate and vulnerable, though he already knew, even from just speaking to her for an hour, that she was anything but, the fragile grace a mask for the core of steel he could already see in her. Her arms and legs were long and thin, every move she made so graceful it left him breathless. Her curves were small but perfect, and her skin an olive complexion, the type that become a nice brown in the summer in a way his never

did, which only ever burnt and then went back to white, leaving behind a bunch of new freckles.

He swallowed hard, unable to hear anything over the roaring in his ears, his fingers digging deep into the comforter below. She was absolutely gorgeous and it took every bit of self-control inside him to look away, quickly squeezing his eyes shut and turning his head away slightly. His Mom had raised him to be a gentleman, and that definitely didn't include gawking at the half-naked girl he'd only met last night, and kissed for the first time barely two minutes ago. He listened to the rustle of her movements as she quickly put on his clothes, and tried desperately not to imagine what was happening on the other side of his eyelids.

El glanced over her shoulder at him as she pushed her head through the top of her borrowed shirt, he soft material settling down over the bottom of her thighs. Her eyes softened, heart clenching as she saw he'd turned his head away, eyes squeezed shut tight, giving her privacy.

Could he be any sweeter? she thought, melting slightly before she shook her head, forcing herself to concentrate as she pulled the sweat-pants up, tightening them and tying off the cord so they wouldn't immediately fall back down. She slowly walked over, sitting on the edge of the bed as she watched him squirm slightly, frowning as he obviously strained to hear what was going on.

She smiled and leant forward, pressing a kiss to his warm cheek.

The soft brush of lips against his cheek made Mike's eyes snap open, wide and surprised, staring at her for long moment before he smiled back, chest tightening at the sight of her in his clothes, looking swamped, adorable and somehow...right. Like she belonged in them.

'Thank you, Mike. I...I better get going if I want to make this class,' she said, voice reluctant as she slowly rose to her feet, walking towards the door with an dissapointed sigh.

'Wait,' Mike said, jumping to his feet, reaching out to grab her hand gently as she went to turn the door handle, clearing his throat awkwardly as she turned back, lifting curious eyes to his.

'How do I find you?' he asked quickly, his face earnest and serious.

El beamed at him, rising up on her toes to press a soft kiss to the corner of his lips, smiling teasingly as she lowered back to the floor.

'You're smart. I'm sure you'll find a way,' she said, winking before she pulled the door open, 'See ya later, Wheeler.'

Mike stared after her as the door closed with a quiet click, lifting one hand to press to the corner of his mouth where he could still feel her lips against his, his entire body thrumming as if electricity was coursing through it.

He didn't realise he was grinning like an idiot until he felt his cheeks began to ache and he let out a triumphant whoop, throwing himself back onto the bed where he bounced for a second before settling, throwing his arm up in the arm like he'd wanted to earlier, not caring that if anyone was watching he'd look like a complete lunatic.

Holy shit, he thought, letting out a giddy laugh, I think I just met the girl I'm going to marry someday.

Notes for the Chapter:

> So...what did everyone think? Please review and let me know! I love hearing from everyone- Katie xx
> P.S I promise I will be responding to reviews tonight.
> Love you guys x

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey guys! I know, I know, it's been such a long wait, but I think I've finally got over my writer's block so yay! I'm not when sure when the next chapter will be posted cause life has gotten so hectic since I started my new job but I will try my hardest to get it out asap.
> Anyways, I hope you like the new chapter :) xxx

El stepped into her apartment, closing the door and leaning against it with a sigh, the smile she had been unable to keep from her face, that had caused her class-mates to send her funny looks all through class, causing her cheeks to ache.

She felt her lips spread into a smile that was somehow even bigger, giddiness bubbling up inside her chest as she let out a small laugh, feeling lighter than she had in years. She lifted a hand to her mouth, caressing her bottom lip where she could still feel the heat of his mouth against hers, even hours later, a warmth and tingling that had yet to fade...and she kind of hoped never would.

Last night was...incredible, she thought, bouncing on her toes as she wrapped her arms around herself, not caring how ridiculous she looked, or how corny or cheesy it would have sounded aloud. She had just had the best night of her life, had met the sweetest, kindest, most amazing boy in existence and she didn't care who knew it.

She wanted to shout it out, to dance around the room till she was dizzy, to write his name beside hers in her diary...all those cliché things girls did when they were...well, not in love...it was too early for that...but when they liked a boy. All the things she had always made fun of with her best friend, rolling her eyes when she'd see the other girls giggling in class or staring after a boy dreamily...but now understood perfectly.

Her mind drifted back to the night before as she leant her head back against the door, eyes fluttering closed as the memories floated

back...

El knelt beside him on the porch, her eyes running over the boy, over Mike's, face as he slumped against the front of the fraternity house, his face slack and eyes closed as his breathing slowly grew steadier.

Shit, she thought, panic filling her as she scrambled closer, reaching out to shake his shoulder urgently.

What if he passed out? There was no way she'd be able to carry him. He was huge! She could tell that, even when he was lying prone in front of her, that he'd be at least two heads taller her, maybe more, his body long and lanky. She had sworn to her uncle as well that she'd never use her powers in public so even that couldn't help her.

She tilted her head to the side, biting her lip as she took him in fully for the first time, not understanding the sudden heat that rushed to her cheeks or the urge to fidget that came over as her eyes traced over him.

He was...pretty, she thought, her lip curling up into a half-smile as she thought of the word he had called her only minutes before. But it definitely suited him better. He reminded her of the prince in the book her Mom used to read to her as a child, The Frog Prince.

His hair, the colour of midnight, fell messily across his forehead and into his eyes, eyes that were dark but seemed to burn, bright and soft in a way that shouldn't be possible but somehow was. His features were sharp, even relaxed in sleep, all cheek-bones and chin, and his skin the colour of snow she had once seen, sprinkled with freckles that she wanted to skate her fingers over, the urge almost irresistible. His lips were the softest part of him, her breath hitching as she remembered the crooked smile he had given her when their eyes had met for the first time.

El shook her head, dragging herself back into focus, and shook his arm again, expression anxious.

'Come on, Mike, wake up. You can't just lie here, we need to get you home.'

Mike jerked upwards, his blood-shot and glassy eyes wide as he looked around panickily, before his eyes lifted and met hers. He stared at her,

blinking once and then twice before the same slow, crooked smile from before spread across his face, making her heart speed up.

'El...' he breathed, reaching up to ran a hand across the curve of her cheek, eyebrows drawing together distractedly as he studied her intensely. 'What did you say?'

She squirmed beneath his gaze, her stomach fluttering uncontrollably as butterflies came to life inside her.

'Um...I asked where you lived. I need to take you home before you die of alcohol poisioning,' she gasped out, letting out a shuddering breath as his hand, that felt absurdly warm against her cool skin, dropped from her cheek, his frown deepening, confusion slipping across his face.

'Home?'

'Yeah home. Do you live on campus in a dorm or are you renting an apartment? Do you remember where your room is?'
His head flopped as he leant back against the wall, lips pursing thoughtfully in a way El couldn't help but find fascinating, her eyes locking onto his mouth, jumping guiltily when his eyes snapped up, focusing again.
His face lit up as he nodded enthusiastically, expression triumphant.

'Yes! I live in a dorm...Patterson...room....23...' he said, eagerly pushing up and stumbling on his feet, almost ramming into a pole.

El's eyes widened and she quickly grabbed his arms, trying to steady him. She let out a quiet 'omph' as he knocked into her, almost taking her back down to the ground with him again, tightening her fingers on his upper arms, barely righting them in time.

El's face grew hot again as she felt every inch of his body now flush against hers, his arms wrapping around her back to hold himself upright, her hips against his and her chest brushing his with every breath in a way she found very...distracting. His face was less than an inch from hers, so close they both went slightly cross-eyed as their eyes locked, neither of them breathing in that moment.

Mike's dark eyes searched hers a long moment before he slowly leant

forward, pressing his forehead against hers, sniffing delicately.

'You smell good,' he mumbled, nuzzling his nose against her curls.

El couldn't help the laugh that escaped from between her lips as she pulled back, pulling his arm over her shoulders so she could duck underneath his armpit, supporting his weight as she pulled them down the three steps and down the path to the sidewalk.

'And you're drunk, but thank you. Seriously, dude, I really need to know which direction we're going in.'

But Mike didn't seem to be listening, his eyes staring into the distance, a faraway look on his face, lost in thought.

El shook her head with a slight sigh, turning them and walking them in the direction of campus, sure they would be able to find their way once he saw something that looked familiar.

She wiggled her shoulder after ten minutes of walking in silence, the muscles in her shoulder beginning to ache and burn from the strain of holding him up, cursing slightly under her breath as she blew a straw curl out of her eyes.

Mike suddenly looked down at her, eyes lighting up as if he'd just gotten an idea and abruptly jerked to a halt, causing El to let out a surprised yelp, stumbling when his weight was abruptly released from her shoulder.

'Ice-cream.'

'What?' El asked, raising her eyebrows at him in confusion as she glanced up at him, reaching up to swipe at the sweat that had begun to form on her forehead, causing her curls to stick to it.

'I want ice-cream. Can we get some? Please?' he begged, pouting, giving her puppy-dog eyes that made everything inside her melt, face softening.

She couldn't resist those soft, dark eyes, eyes that made her feel like he could see into her, to see every secret she had, everything that she had kept inside for so long, and every thought and feeling she had never spoke aloud.

Well...what could it hurt? she thought. It wasn't that late...and an ice-cream sounded pretty damn good right that moment.

'Okay.'

Mike's eyes widened in almost comical shock, a happy smile stretching his lips.

'Really?' he asked, bouncing up and down excitedly like a child, clapping his hands.

El laughed, nodding, drawn in by his enthusiasm.

'Yes, really. But you need to walk if we're going to get some okay? I can't carry you all that way.'

Mike squinted at her for a second as he seemed to try and comprehend her words, before his expression changed to one of determination. He stepped back, tittering on his wobbly legs for a second before he straightened his shoulders, and slowly walked towards her, grinning widely as he no longer veered off in every direction.

He held out a hand to her as he reached her side, his smile softening slightly.

'Come on, pretty El, let's go get some ice-cream.'

El hesitated, eyeing his hand for a long moment as he waited patiently, a soft smile hovering at the corners of his mouth, as if he could feel the sudden unsureness inside her, as if he too could hear the voice that had suddenly drifted through her mind...the voice that sounded so much like her Mama...that told her if she took his hand it would change her life. That it would change everything completely.

She took a deep breath before slowly laying her hand in his, swallowing as she felt the blaze of heat that followed his thumb as it slid across her knuckles. Mike slipped his fingers through hers, squeezing gently, almost reassuringly, as they began to walk together quietly, and El couldn't help but notice, as her heart raced in her chest and a smile she couldn't help tugged at her mouth, that his fingers fit perfectly around her own.

El's mind drifted back from the memory of last night as she heard the

familiar sound of metal scraping against porcelein suddenly fill the apartment, blinking as she tried to bring her mind back to the present.

She pushed up from the door reluctantly, walking down the hall and past the many rooms that made up their apartment, almost ten in total, all except for two which she and her room-mate had claimed the day they had moved in. They lived off-campus, in an old dorm that was once in use back when the university had first been opened, housing the many boys that had called the place home for a while before they went on to do whatever jobs their degrees had given them access to.
It had been empty for almost ten years when her Uncle had somehow charmed...or threatened, the latter seeming more likely...the Dean into allowing El and her room-mate to rent it while they were studying. It had been one of the many stipulations her Uncle had had when she begged to be allowed to go to college, to be normal for once in her life. She had to live off-campus and the rental contract had to be in her room-mates name only, in-linkable to El.

Speaking of her room-mate, El thought as she stepped out of the hallway and into the kitchen, leaning against the wall and raising her eyebrows as she found her room-mate, Max Mayfield, sitting cross-legged on the kitchen counter, a position she found her in almost four times a week.

Typical, she thought, rolling her eyes.

Max froze as she lifted her spoon of cereal to her mouth, eyes wide as they found El watching her, arms crossed over her chest and eyebrows raised.

'Uh...hi, El,' she said, dropping her spoon back into her bowl, her expression guilty as she shifted on the counter, giving a pained grimace, instead of the winning smile she'd been hoping for.

'Well...isn't it the big bailer? Where the hell were you last night, huh? You make me go to this party and then don't even show? And you know we have a table right? The place where most people eat their food. Shocking information, I know,' El said sarcastically, pushing off the wall and coming to stand in front of Max.

Max rolled her eyes at her long-time friend's dramatics.

'Someone certainly is grumpy this morning. Didn't you have your nap today?'

When El just continued to glare at her, lips not even twitching from the irritated scowl on her face, she huffed, shoving herself down from the counter.

'Look I'm really sorry, okay? Something came up and I....' Max trailed off after a second, frowning slightly as she looked El over for a long moment before her eyes widened slightly, a wide smirk twisting her lips.

'Well well well, looks like someone had plenty of fun without me anyways.'

El blinked, frowning at her in confusion.

Max's only smirked harder, flicking a pointed look down at her El's borrowed clothes, raising an eyebrow at her.

El's eyes slowly lowered down to her clothes, eyes bulging for a second as she realised she was still wearing Mike's clothes, before she blushed bright red, glancing quickly away, avoiding Max's eyes as she began to speed-walk past her, trying to get to her room, and more importantly, the lock on the door.

'I don't know what you're talking about...', she hastily muttered under her breath.

'Nuh-uh, Ives,' Max said, grinning as she caught El's arm just as she reached her doorway, yanking her back with a hard tug.

El let out a loud squeak, grabbing desperately at the back of the couch to stop Max from dragging her back, throwing a glare at Max over her shoulder. Max ignored it completely, her expression almost gleeful as she shook a finger at her.

'You can't fool me, El. I know that look. Spill! I want all the details. Who is he? Where did you meet? What did you two do? Tell me...tell me...tell me...'

El gaped at her, her cheeks so hot now that they felt like they were on fire.

'Max! Seriously? We didn't...I didn't...no! I would never...we just met last night...and I do not have a look,' she spluttered in protest, squirming in spot under Max's half-sceptical, half-amused look, trying to tug her hand out of her grip, giving up with a groan as her hold only tightened.

'You so did! You think I didn't notice you at the door earlier? You did the whole romantic film and soap opera lean against the door, breathy sigh thing,' Max said, throwing her head back and laying her hand over her forehead dramatically, fluttering her eyelashes with a laugh.

El glowered at her, giving her a quick shove that made Max laugh even harder, before she narrowed her eyes, lifting a tiny tendril of her powers to reach over and pinch Max's arm. Hard.

Max jumped in shock, letting go of her hand with a quiet yelp. She gaped at the tiny red mark marking her pale skin for a second before realisation dawned on her face and swung around to glare at El indignantly.

'Hey, no powers!'

El shrugged, face smug as she walked over to the couch, throwing herself on it and crossing her legs casually in front of her.

'That's what you get, Mayfield.'

Max stuck her tongue at her childishly. El did it back, scrunching her face up into a weird grimace that made Max burst out laughing, before muttering under her breath.

'Damn it, you always get me with that one. You're right though and I'm sorry. I shouldn't have teased you', Max said, pushing El's legs to the side so she could sit down beside her, wrapping her arms around her knees.

'It's okay,' El said, nudging Max's knee with her socked foot, rocking it gently, smiling to show she wasn't really mad.

Max grinned back, pushing her wild red hair off her shoulder, before peeking out at her out of the corner of her eye. She bit her lip, trying to hold back the words that wanted to burst out of her, not wanting to embarass or upset El again, but she just couldn't hold them back.

'Sorry I can't...you totally met a guy right? I'm not imagining this.'

El's cheeks went bright pink even as they stretched into the widest grin Max had ever seen on her face, completely lighting it up as she nodded.

'Yeah...his name is Mike. Max, I just had....it was the most amazing night of my life. This guy...he's just so....sweet and kind, and when he smiles at me...I get this....fluttery feeling right here,' she said, pressing a hand to her stomach, happiness bubbling up inside her as her cheeks began to ache with how hard she was smiling, 'I've never felt this way before Max. It sounds crazy but I...I already miss him.'

Max's eyes widened and she scooted in closer eagerly.

'Seriously? What happened between you two? Tell me everything.'

So El did. She told her the whole story, not leaving a single part out, from meeting him when he'd literally drunkenly collided with her on the doorstep of the fraternity,, of the long walk to his dorm, the stop to get ice-cream and everything that had happened after.

'And then...we kissed', she said, biting her lip to try and calm the smile that only seemed to grow bigger with every second, 'this morning before I left.'

Max let out a loud squeal, bouncing on the couch excitedly.

'Holy shit, El. What was it like? Did you like it or was it all sloppy and gross?'

El shook her head, leaning back against the couch, giggling.

'Not at all. It was...I don't even know how to describe it. It was so soft but I swear I felt it through every part of me...and the way he touched my face the whole time, so gently and tenderly...' she sighed, squirming slightly in remembrance as she lifted bright eyes to Max's

who was staring at her, wide-eyed, gaping slightly, 'It was the best kiss I've ever had.'

'That sounds...' Max swallowed hard, blinking as she came back from trying to imagining it, giving a breathy laugh, 'Wow.'

El laughed.

'I know right.'

'I'm seriously so happy for you, El. I've never seen you like this about a guy before.'

El's face suddenly fell at her words, her eyes growing distant as she looked away, twisting her fingers in her lap anxiously as she realised with a sudden horror what she had done...what she had allowed herself to do.

Max was right. She had never been like this about a boy before...because she'd never let one get close enough before to ever feel this way.

Freaking hell, what was she doing? How had she let herself get attached so quickly? she thought, burying her hands in her hair as she felt her breath beginning to quicken, throat tightening almost painfully. How could she be so stupid? How could she let this happen....when she knew it could blow up in her face at any moment, like it had so many times before.

She had been running for as long as she could remember...one of her very first memories was one of pure fear racing through her veins as she dashed through the woods on tiny feet at the age of six...and the sound of a gunshot that tore up the silence...that still rang in her ears when she woke from a nightmare, gasping for breath, reliving the moment the Bad Men had taken her Mama away from her forever.

She'd been running from that moment, having to leave every home and every friend she'd ever had, every feeling of safety and normalcy she'd manage to scrap together, putting every person she loved or knew in danger with her mere presence, as they'd hunted her. The Department of Energy, the professional mask the Bad Men wore to

conceal the horrors their organisation carried out, the kidnapping of children to use as weapons for their every whim.

They had tried to take her so many times over the years she'd lost count, her Uncle and her barely managing to disappear each time. It had only take one slip-up, for them to grow too comfortable for one moment, for them to snatch her up when she was twelve years old.

For three weeks she'd been their prisoner and it had been the longest three weeks of her life. She had been forced to do tests and experiments that made her head hurt and her nose and ears bleed, trying to make her do horrible things, to hurt people and animals, and injecting her with cold drugs that left her weak and sick, vomiting and shivering with fever, muscles aching and spasming uncontrollably as she shivered on the small cot they threw her on every night, crying and screaming for her Uncle, her only family, to save her.

But she hadn't fought them, silently and slowly gathering her mental strength until she managed to stun her guards with a telekinetic blow, slipping from the small dark room they locked in night after night and escaping through a drain pipe back out into the world...back to her Uncle...who'd bundled her up and drove as fast and far as a could. And they'd never stopped running from that moment.

Not until a year ago, when El had finally gotten up the courage to beg her Uncle to let her go to college, to give her a tiny bit of normalcy that she craved, that she had missed out on all through her childhood. He had finally relented after months of begging and pleading, letting her go to college under the stipulation she use a false name and lived off campus with the rent in Max's name. Completely untraceable to her.

It had been quiet for six years. Six long years with not a single sign or whisper of them coming for her, but she knew now, after everything, that she could never let her guard down. Not for a single moment because while they might be silent now they would never stop looking for her...and they would never stop trying to take her back. Not when they thought they owned her, that she was their property, to use and abuse as they wished.

El shuddered, rubbing her arms absently-mindedly as she felt the haunting echo of their needles digging deep into her flesh, leaving scars that still marked her flesh and a dark number tattoo, an 011 that had branded her as their property. Constant reminders of their cruelty and the monsters who were tracking her.

Could she really do this? To him? Risk it? Risk dragging him into her mess of a life?

But god did she want to. She wanted to give this...thing...whatever it was she felt with Mike that made her heart race, that made her fingers itch to trace the freckles on his cheeks, finding all the shapes and constellations they formed....and which made her smile more than she had in years...a chance.

But was that fair to him?

Max's throat clenched as she saw the tears filling El's eyes, sensing the sudden hesitance, the inner battle inside her, the worry of it stiffening her shoulders and making them curl in on themselves. She moved in closer, wrapping an arm around El's shoulder and squeezing gently, leaning their heads together.

'This is a good thing, El.'
El sniffled, reaching up to dash at the tears that were suddenly spilling over onto her cheeks, not even sure when she'd started to cry.

'I know...I just can't help but worry...what if I...let him in and then they find me? What if I have to leave? I can't...I can't do it again, Max...I can't let someone in and just...lose them. I wouldn't survive it. You know hard I tried to keep you at arms length. Maybe it's better if I....If I just forget about him,' El said, her lips trembling at the mere thought of never seeing him again, fresh tears filling her eyes.

Who was she trying to fool? There was no way she'd ever be able to forget about it. About him. Not now. Not ever. He already meant too much....what he meant, she wasn't sure exactly...but it was too late. He was already a part of her...imprinted on her very being in a way she didn't understand but somehow sensed wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. Maybe ever.

Max shook her head quickly, grabbing El's shoulders and turning her firmly until she was facing her, expression fierce. Only a few years ago touching her like that would have caused El to flinch and gotten Max almost thrown across the room. But now it was second-nature and comforting, their friendship more like a sisterhood.

'I get it. I really do, El, more than anyone else probably could but you can't not give this a chance because of a maybe. A possibility that might never happen. Those assholes have already stolen too much of your life. Don't let them take this away too. You haven't seen or heard anything of them in six years. They're gone. You're free to live your life. So do it. If anyone has earned the right it's you.'

El nodded, letting out a shuddering breath as she leant her head against Max's shoulder.

'I know you're right. And I want to. I want it so badly it hurts but....I'm scared.'

Max smiled, nudging her with her shoulder.

'Of course you are. But trust me...that's what makes it all the more thrilling,' she said, wiggling her eyebrows at her, making El give a wet laugh.

'Oh shut up. But what about you? When are you going to meet a nice guy? One who won't treat you like crap.'

Max snorted.

'Yeah, right. That would be the day. No, I'm resigned to the fact that my tastes fall strictly into the asshole category. There is no fixing that, unfortunately.'

Max's life definitely had been full of assholes, there was no denying that fact, El thought as she glanced at her best-friend fondly, still not entirely sure how they had ended up friends in the first place, or how she had been so lucky in that department. Probably because Max had been so stubborn and ignored every attempt El had made to keep her at arms length.

They had, ironically enough, met because of one of the many jerks in

Max's life, this one being her step-brother Billy.
It had been barely a year after the Bad Men had taken her and it had been the worst year of El's life. She had been thirteen and furious with the world and everyone in it, hating that everyone else got to have a normal life, with a home and parents, being able to go to arcades and dances and have fun, and make friends while she was hunted like an animal every second of hers. She had acted out in anyway she could, skipping classes, refusing to eat, throwing telekinetic tantrums that had left their small cabin a complete wreck that had taken weeks to repair and clean, and picking fights with anyone who would take her on, coming home many days bruised with blood dripping from her nose.

Doing anything to help her feel something other than the numbness and agonising helplessness that constantly sat in the pit of her stomach, reminding her everyday that she hadn't been able to fight them, that she was weak and would never be strong enough to save herself.

She had been sitting by herself at lunch, picking at the PB & J sandwich her Uncle had packed her, when she had heard a pained cry and glanced up in time to see a red-headed girl's face contorting in pain, a boy with long blond hair twisting her arm behind her back, a sick grin on his face. And she had seen red.

To this day she still hated people like that, the kind that preyed on the weak and hurt them for their own amusement or sick joy, for their own agenda. People like the men that had taken and hurt her all those years ago.

Before El had known what she was doing she had been slamming her fist into the boy's nose, watching and listening with furious satisfaction as it had broken with a loud crack, blood spurting down his lips and chin while he'd cried out in agony, dropping his grip on the girl and falling to his knees, holding his nose with both hands as blood dripped down his fingers.

El had crouched in front of him, using her powers to put pressure on the break, lifting her chin as his eyes rolled back into his head slightly at the agonising pain, terror crossing his face as she stared at him.

'If you ever touch her again, I'll break something you're going to miss even more than you're nose', she told him, her eyes dipping down to the front of his pants.

His eyes had widened and he'd nodded quickly, getting up and scrambling away with a final panicked glance over his shoulder.

El had risen to her feet, quickly reaching up to wipe at the blood that was beginning to seep out of her nose before anyone could see it, and without a second glance at the girl who gaped at her, eyes wide and mouth hanging open with complete shock, began to walk away.

'Hey, wait up!' the girl called after her, grabbing her skateboard off the ground and hurrying after her, grinning widely. 'That was so cool, what you just did. You're El right? I'm Max. Thank you so much for...'

El had whirled around to glare at her, fingers clenched into fists as she tried to make her face look as intimidating as possible, glowering at her.

'Go away', she spat out, before spinning back around and stomping back to her sandwich, trying to ignore the guilt that stirred to life in her stomach at the hurt and bewilderment on Max's face as she'd grabbed her bag and walked back into school, certain that she had gotten her point across and that the girl would back off.

But she'd been wrong. Max hadn't taken no for an answer, determined to be her friend from that moment onwards. She had just patiently followed her around for months, sitting beside her silently at lunch, taking notes beside her in class, and even skating alongside her on her walk to and from school, having somehow found out where she lived.

El hadn't spoken to her again, not a single word, for two whole months before she'd finally cracked, sighing and turning towards her in the middle of the street as they'd walked to school one morning.

'You're not going to give up are you?' she asked, bewilderment filling her, staring at her like she had two heads, not understanding this girl at all. She'd been ignoring her for months, being rude and even downright mean sometimes and still she kept coming back. What was

wrong with her?

Max had shook her head with a wide grin, throwing her hair over her shoulder as she skated in a circle.

'Nope,' she said, popping the 'p' as she gave a shrug, 'I've decided your going to be my new best friend. You're the coolest person at this school...all the other girls have been total bitches who've ever ignored me or made fun of me.'

'I've ignored you,' El pointed out, cocking her head to the side, her confusion growing.

'Yeah, well, you also kicked my step-brother's ass so that makes up for it. You might as well give up, Ives. I stick like glue. Trust me, I'm the best you're going to get in the friendship department.'

El had given an exasperated groan as she had started to walk again, the sound of the skateboards wheels following her as Max had taken off, but she hadn't been able to help the small smile that had tilted the corner of her mouth up, at the thought of having a friend, a real friend for the first time in her life.

They had been inseparable from that moment onwards. Max had practically lived with her and her Uncle for their final years of high-school, when her home life had become too stressful or scary or unbearable and she'd needed a safe place to go where she was always welcome.

But it had still taken El two years before she'd taken the chance, till she had trusted Max enough to show her her powers. They had been sitting in El's tiny bedroom during a sleepover when El had taken a deep breath and made the books on her desk float into the air, dancing in front of their eyes, her heart racing and the urge to vomit almost overwhelming, the bile sitting in her throat as she thought of what she might lose and what she was risking by opening this part of herself up to Max.

Max had watched with wide-eyes, mouth opening and shutting in shock for a long moment before she'd swung around to stare at El, seeing the line of blood that was dripping from her nose, and the

intense glare on her face as she'd stared at the books, purposelessly avoiding her gaze.

El had shifted anxiously on the bed, tears filling her eyes as she'd waited for the scream, for Max to run from the room or to call her a freak or a monster. But all she had done was grin widely, lifting a hand to snatch one of the books from the air, throwing it back up for El to catch with an amazed laugh.

'This. Is. So. Freaking awesome, El! What else can you do?'

The relief that had flooded through El in that moment had left her head spinning dizzily, letting out a quiet sob as she'd thrown her arms around her, hugging her for the first time in their short friendship. She had known from that moment that she could trust Max with her life. And they had never looked back, best friends forever, as the hand-made bracelets they'd made when they were sixteen and still proudly sat on their wrists to that day.

El turned back to Max, drifting back into the present as a sudden thought flitted through her mind, frowning.

'Wait...so where were you last night? You didn't say.'

Max leant back against the couch, the guilt from before creeping back onto her features.

'I really am sorry about ditching you, El. I did actually go to the party, by the way, but before I could find you I ran into my ex. You know, the one I had in Hawkins's, before I moved to Indianapolis and we met?'

El nodded after thinking for a moment, vaguely remembering seeing photos of a dark-skinned boy with cautious eyes but a big friendly smile with his arm draped over Max's shoulder in her room.

'He was the only exception to the piles of jerks that have plagued my love life', Max said with a false, put-upon sigh before she continued with a laugh, 'Anyway, we ended up talking for a while. He's going through some...personal changes...and needed a friendly shoulder to cry on. Metaphorically speaking. And when I finally got away you

were gone. So did you tell him?'

El shook her head, baffled by the abrupt change in conversation.

'Tell him what?'

'About the whole power thing', Max said, wiggling her fingers at her in a witchy way.

El snorted, laughing like Max had wanted her to, reaching up to wipe at her still damp eyes.

'Yeah sure. That's definitely a first date conversation right there. "Hey, I'm El, and I have telekinetic powers I got from a bunch of mad scientists who experimented on my Mom while she was pregnant with me and have been trying to kidnap and lock me away for my entire life". I don't think so. It took me two years before I even told you.'

'I remember...' Max said, sniffing derisively at the memory, 'I'm still at pissed at you for that by the way. But I'm willing to forgive that complete lack of trust, and offence to our friendship, if you swear that you'll go see him again.'

El rolled her eyes as Max held out her pinkie, her expression almost threatening, but obediently reached over and hooked her finger around Max's, pumping twice, grinning at the childish gesture.

'I swear', she said, before her eyes popped wide, panic rising inside her as something occurred to her, her hand dropping abruptly to her side.

'Oh my god, I am so freaking stupid! I didn't give him anything to contact me with. No number, no address nothing.'

She stood up to pace back and forth in front of the couch, reaching up to tug at her curls, cursing herself loudly.

'Ugh...I just had to be all coy and mysterious. What was I thinking? Idiot,' she groaned, burying her face in her hands.

Max snorted out a laugh that she barely covered with a cough as El

lifted her head to glare at her.

'Calm down, El, jeesh. Just go and see him. Ask him out. It's not like you don't know where he lives right?'

Relief flooded El, replacing the panic that had so quickly rushed into, and she flushed, realising how ridiculous she must have just looked. In all the craziness of that morning, and emotional wringing she'd just went through, it had completely slipped her mind that she, of course, knew where to find him.

El glanced at the door, her insides quivering excitedly even as she had to physically had to lock her muscles in place to stop herself from bolting through it to go and see him again, the eagerness and need that suddenly filled her shocking.

You just saw him, she scolded herself, inwardly shaking her head. You can't just show up at his room right now. That's all sorts of crazy.

She was so lost in her thoughts she barely noticed the considering look Max was giving her, a sly look sliding into her eyes.

'So I guess I did you a favour by ditching you last...' she trailed off as El sent her an incredulous look, raising one eyebrow at her.

'Ha, you're not getting away with it that easy. I'm still pissed at you.'

'Damn,' Max muttered under her breath, sighing.

Well, it was worth a try.

'You can make it up to me by buying the pizzas tonight,' El said, beginning to walk towards her, expression satisifed as she watched Max's mouth fall open, knowing how much the pizzas cost for their usual Monday movie night, and how much it was going to make her bank account sting. Oh yes, it was definitely a punishment worthy of the name.

'Ugh, fine. But no pineapple,' Max said, spitefully, smirking as El stopped in her tracks, face aghast, before she clenched her jaw, something sneaky shifting across her face.

'Then no olives.'

'Fine.'

'Fine.'

They glared at each other for a second before their lips twitched and they both burst out laughing, shaking their heads.

'Okay, okay...we'll have both. And I'll grab the movies for tonight. In the mood for anything in particular.'

'Nah, I'm good with whatever', El said, shrugging.

'Cool. Now go and get some sleep. You look like shit.'

El shot Max the finger over her shoulder as she turned to walk into her room, Max's laugh ringing out through the apartment before El heard the front door close with a loud slam.

She threw herself down onto the bed, bouncing twice before she settled and buried her face in her cool pillow, groaning in relief.
Now to sleep for two days, she thought, exhaustion beating at her for a long moment, barely having time to pull her comforter over her before the welcome darkness of unconsciousness pulled her under within seconds of her head touching the pillow.

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Mike stepped away from the line at the campus cafeteria, the wide grin he hadn't been able to keep off his face tugging at the corners of his mouth as he made his way to the table where his friends were already gathered, talking loudly and animatedly.

He couldn't remember a time when he had been this happy. He couldn't stop thinking about her. About El. The girl who, as silly and cheesy as it sounded, had turned his life upside down in less than twenty-four hours. The girl with the wild brown curls, the warm brown eyes, and secret, half-smile that made his insides melt and his heart skip a beat. The girl he somehow just knew was going to be a huge part of his life. Now he just had to find her again.

The thought sobered him slightly, dimming his smile as he sat down dejectedly at the table, his eyebrows drawing together into a frown.

How was he going to find her? He had almost nothing to go on, nothing except her name and that her room-mate name was Max.
This was going to be nearly impossible, but he'd do it, he thought, sudden determination rising inside him. He was going to find her, that much he was sure of. No matter what it took.

He glanced around curiously as the excitement in his friend's voices suddenly registered, frown deepening. He flinched slightly at the loudness, a headache still dully pounding at his temples, but he still felt a million times better than he had that morning, to his relief. His hangover was almost completely gone after taking three Tylenol and sleeping half the day, missing two of his classes but it had been worth the catch-up work he'd have to do later.

'What are we talking about?' he asked as he settled beside them, putting his tray of food on the table and ravenously digging into his burger, surprised by the excited smile lighting up his friend, Will's, face.

'My Mom called this morning with some news. She's getting married in December.'

Mike grinned at him, before reaching over and slapping him on the shoulder.

'That's awesome, Will. Congratulations.'

And it was. If anyone deserved every bit of happiness the world could offer it was definitely Will's Mom, Joyce Byers. She'd had a hard life, first dealing with her loser and jerk of an ex-husband who had abandoned them when Will was still a kid, to all the struggling she'd had to do, working long hours to just put food on the table, but still managing to be there for the two sons she adored, spending every spare second and cent she had with and on them, to make sure they were happy. And, from what he'd heard from Will, her boyfriend (who was actually an ex from high-school) treated her like she hung the moon. Which was good for him, because if he didn't he'd have four pissed off college students to deal with. Joyce had always been

Mike's favourite of his friend's Moms. She had always treated him and the others like they were her own children, her home always open to them at any time, which had been a welcome change for Mike whose own Mom had grown disinterested in her children for a long time in their teenage years while her marriage was falling apart.

Will grinned back.

'Thanks, Mike. You're all invited by the way. Mom's organising it so we'll all be on winter break and can be there. Oh, and I get a step-sister from it!'

'Seriously? You didn't mention that,' Dustin said, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

Will nodded, expression a little sheepish.

'Well, she'd kind of be my step-sister. She's the guys niece, he's been raising her since she was like six. And she's our age and at college as well, so it's not like it's going to be much difference. But it'll be cool to finally meet her. I've heard heaps about her.'

'Will Byer's having a sister,' Lucas mused, chewing on a bite of his pizza in mock-thought, before shaking his head, expression amused, 'Nope, can't picture it. It's too weird.'

Will flushed slightly, throwing a pea at Lucas.

'Oh shut up,' he said, before turning to look at Mike, eyes squinting with sudden concern, 'Hey, the guys said you just disappeared from that party last night. Are you okay? We came to your room this morning but there was no answer.'

Lucas snorted.
'Yeah, Dustin was worried you'd been abducted by aliens or something.'

Dustin glared at him, face scrunching up into a scowl.

'Hey! It could happen. There have been all these sightings of Big Foot, why not aliens?'

'"Why not aliens?"', Lucas mimicked, rolling his eyes at him, 'Do you know how insane you sound? When could that ever happen?'

'Screw you, Lucas', Dustin said indignantly, scowling at him, leaning over the table to give him a hard shove.

Lucas kicked him under the table, eyes narrowing irritatingly.

Will, unfortunately caught in the middle as he often was with those two, shoved them both back with an annoyed grunt.

'Quit it, guys. Seriously,' he said, shaking his head before turning back to Mike, eyebrows raised, 'So what happened? Where'd you go, Mike?'

Mike flushed as all eyes suddenly turned to him, shrugging his shoulders self-consciously.

'I...uh...I accidentally drank the punch last night. I didn't realise it was spiked and ended up completely wasted.'

They stared at him for a second before Dustin burst out laughing, the force of it shaking his curls, reaching up to wipe at the tears that gathered at his eyes. The others joined, laughing loudly as Mike's face grew steadily warmer.

'Oh my god. That's the best thing I've heard in ages,' Lucas said, pointedly ignoring the glare Mike was sending them all, while Will shot him an apologetic look, though he couldn't quite hold back the amusement twitching at his lips.

'I wish I'd been there to see that. Where did you end up? Please tell you didn't end up in bed with some creepy guy or in a bathtub of ice missing a kidney.'

Lucas groaned at Dustin, expression growing exasperated.

'What is it with you and urban legends all of a sudden?'

'Uh...well...they weren't creepy...and they weren't a guy..' Mike said slowly, head snapping back in surprise as they all turned to gape at him as one, mouths hanging open almost comically.

'What? No way? You had a girl in your room?' Will said, voice filled with surprise.

'Not just in his room, in his bed!' Dustin said, his eyes wide as he stared at Mike, his face of shock and something that resembled awe.

'Holy shit, Mike. You actually met a girl? Like talked to her and everything?'

At Mike's nod, Lucas grinned, shaking his head.

'Wow. This is huge, guys. Our Mikey's growing up,' he said, wiping at an invisible tear, sniffing dramatically.

Mike rolled his eyes, though he couldn't help but grin, shoving him.

'Shut up, Lucas. And for your information, we did more than just talk. We kissed, this morning before she left. Twice.'

He smiled smugly, crossing his arms over his chest as they gaped at him again, eyes almost bulging out of their heads, before questions burst from them, so quickly Mike blinked at them dazedly, unable to focus on them all.

'So what's the poor girl's name?'

'You and a girl...bloody hell...'

'How'd you meet her?'

'What's she like?'

Mike quickly spoke before they could ask anything else, grabbing onto the last question like a lifeline, his smug smile softening into something gentler.

'She's....she's amazing, guys. Really pretty and so smart and funny. We met at the party. I knocked her down cause I couldn't walk properly and she looked after me from then. I don't remember a lot of it, but we ended up crashing in my room sometime this morning and for some reason she...she stayed. But what I can remember...' he trailed off, an almost-dreamy expression slipping onto his face that

made them stop and stare, exchanging surprised looks.

They had never seen him look that way before, not about any girl he'd ever had a crush on. This...whoever this girl was....whatever this was...it was huge.

Will glanced at him thoughtfully for a long moment, head cocked to the side as he chewed the inside of his cheek before he spoke.

'Um....she wouldn't happen to have short, curly brown hair, brown eyes, about my height and studying to be a nurse? El Ives.'

Mike's head snapped up, blinking at Will, stunned.

'Wait, you know El? How?'

Will nodded, smiling.

'Yeah I met her in one of my art classes last semester. She was just doing it for fun...but she was actually really good and we ended up partnered for a project. You're right, she is so cool, Mike. She has an apartment off campus and it's just filled with so much stuff. You guys would really like her,' he said, turning to Dustin and Lucas, 'She's into heaps of the same things we are. Like she has this huge Storm Trooper replica in her room, heaps of movie posters all over the place from the Goonies and Indiana Jones and stuff, and like every Atari game you can think of'.

Lucas frowned at him, confused.

'Why didn't we hear about her before? What project?'

Will's eyes widened and he let out an audible gulp, his face flushing as red as a tomato before he glanced down at his food and studied it like it was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen.

'Ugh, I really need to learn to keep your mouth shut', he muttered to himself, missing the bewildered looks the others shot to other each other as they heard him. What was the big deal? Why was he acting so weird?

'Umm....' Will began, reluctantly lifting his head to look at them,

avoiding Mike's gaze, 'remember that live model drawing I had to do last semester?'

'Yeah, what about it?' Mike asked slowly, frowning at him, beyond confused now.

'Well I....um...'

Dustin suddenly spat out in his drink, eyes wide as he swung them towards Will whose own face blanched at the sudden realisation dawning on his face. Dustin ignored Lucas's grunt of disgust as he swiped at the soda now running down his shirt, and pointed a finger at Will.

'No freaking way. Are you serious? The girl Mike met last night was the one you drew naked last semester?'

'What?' Mike spluttered, watching as Will somehow went even redder, mouth opening and closing like a fish.

'Wait, you saw this girl naked?' Lucas suddenly, his expression disgruntled as he looked at Will, who sent him a confused look, not understanding why he'd be upset about it.

'Dude, you have to have to show us that drawing,' Dustin said, glancing at Mike out of the corner of his eyes, pressing his lips together to hold back the laugh he was trying to hold back, watching him stiffen before turning towards him angrily.

'No, no way,' Mike yelled, outraged, causing several people to turn around and stare at him.

Blood rushed up his neck and into his cheeks until the tips of his ears feeling like they were on fire, but it didn't stop him from glaring at Dustin who held up his hands in surrender, giving him a baffled 'what' look.

Will recovered from his embarrassment with a weak chuckle, happy that the attention had switched from him, and quickly gulped down some water, trying to cool his burning cheeks.

'Yeah, not going to happen, Dustin', he said, biting back a grin at the

way Mike was still glaring at him indignantly, amused and oddly pleased by how protective Mike already was of El.

'Pervert', Lucas muttered under his breath, shaking his head at him.

Dustin held his hands up, expression offended.

'First of all, it was a joke, you jerks. And I don't why you were all mad at me. Will's the one who's seen Mike's girl naked.'

Will's head snapped up, almost swallowing his own tongue, causing Lucas's eyes to widen with panic and smack him quickly on the back. Will sent him a grateful look, cheeks beyond scarlet now, so hot it was almost scalding him.

'I didn't...I mean...it was for art...I didn't even see anything...I like guys!' he said, throwing the last words out desperately.

'She's not my girl', Mike protested weakly, speaking quickly over Will's panicked stammering, trying to pull his features into a blank mask, or really anything that would hide the very deep feelings he already had for her.

He had never been really good at hiding his emotions, everything he felt always written all over his face for everyone to see, and from the sceptical and disbelieving looks they were sending him, he wasn't doing a very good job this time either.

Lucas scoffed, snorting.

'Yeah right, Mike. You are totally into this girl. It's all over your goofy, grinning, heart-eye making face. I bet you're already doodling her name next to yours in your notebook,' he said, batting his eyelashes at him, smirking, 'Mr. El Ives.'

'When's the wedding, Mike, huh? Go it all planned already?' Dustin said, letting out a quick cackle of laughter as he reached over and high-fived Lucas.

Mike narrowed his eyes at them even as his cheeks burned with embarrassment and annoyance, leaning forward to kick them both under the table, listening to their loud 'heys' and grunts of pain with

only a tiny bit of satisfaction

'Shut up', he hissed, glaring down at the table with his arms crossed over his chest, irritation growing with every new joke they made.

Of course they would treat it like a joke, he thought, grinding his teeth. But what would they know? It's not like they had ever felt this way about anyone before. They didn't understand. If they had been there last night....maybe they would get it. Maybe not. But it didn't matter, cause he did. And he knew it wasn't a joke. Nothing had ever been more serious to him in his life.

Will watched the shifting emotions on Mike's face, growing more worried with every second as the anger and irritation faded, to be replaced by a helplessness that made his stomach clench. He turned towards the others, giving them a stern look, jerking his head towards Mike. They froze, the jokes trailing off as they took in the actual hurt and embarrassment on Mike's face and shoot him apologetic looks, guilt quickly filling them.

Will sighed, before turning to face Mike again, reaching out to pat his arm.

'But you do like her right?' he asked him, eyes soft and questioning.

Mike sighed, the annoyance melting away as he ran a hand over his face, lifting his eyes to meet their curious eyes.

'Yes I like her', he said quietly, 'I really like her. I've known her for less than twenty-four hours and I just...can't stop thinking about her. I'm not sure what exactly happened between us last night but it...it changed something. It's like it's...painful to be apart from her now. I...I already miss her,' he said, tone miserable and bewildered, not understanding it at all.

How was he already feeling this much for her? Already falling for her so hard. It wasn't normal...was it?

Lucas, Will and Dustin exchanged a look, surprised by the depth of feeling that they could see in Mike's face, his eyes dark with confusion and a longing that was so personal and raw they almost

had to look away. It was longing that seemed to belong to someone else, as if he'd taken a step away from them, gone on to an older, serious place than they had yet to experience.

He couldn't be in....no, that wasn't possible...not this quick...right? Dustin shook away the thought as he shoved his chair closer to Mike's with a loud squeal against the linoleum, sending him a sympathetic look.

'Well why don't you and see her? Tell her what you just told us,' he asked, his tone gentler, nudging Mike with his shoulder.

Mike let out a groan, running a hand through his hair in frustration.

'Cause I don't know where she lives. I have no way of finding her and even if I did I couldn't tell her that! She'd think I was crazy.'

'What do you know about her?' Lucas asked, all teasing gone from his face, expression serious as he straightened up, 'It can't be that hard to find her. We'll help you look.'

Mike shrugged dejectedly.

'Barely anything. All I know is her name is El and she is studying to be a nurse. That's it!'

'We could always go to the nursing department and get them to look her up? They'd have to have her on record.' Dustin supplied helpfully.

But Lucas shook his head, dismissing the idea.

'They're not just going to give out that information. And anyway, he'd look like a complete stalker if he tried.'

'Isn't he kind of though?' Dustin said slowly, almost hesitantly, voice tinged with confusion.

Mike dropped his feet to the table with a loud bang, groaning loudly, before grumbling under his breath.

Ugh, he was so right. If she could see or hear him right now, she would probably run screaming from the crazy ass stalker. What was

happening to him? What was he doing?

Lucas patted Mike's back comfortingly, sending Dustin an exasperated look across the table.

'Not helpful, Dustin'.

'Uh guys...' Will said, voice almost swallowed by their loud planning, talking over one another, trying to find an answer to their dilemma.

He rolled his eyes, used to their antics, before raising his voice, yelling over them.

'GUYS!'

They stopped mid-sentence, turning questioning eyes to him.

'I know where El lives,' he said slowly, giving them a duh-look, 'We did the art project at her apartment. How else would I know what she has in her room?'

Mike stared at him for a long moment, hope rising in his chest before he turned to look at Lucas, the only one of them who owned a car, expression almost pleading.

'Do you mind?'

Lucas shook his head, already on his feet, hands digging into his pocket for his keys.

'Of course not. Let's go. You guys coming?'

Dustin pushed his chair back with a loud squeak, grinning as he nodded.

'Hell yeah. I want to meet the girl who attracted Mike's fickle ass'.

Will huffed out a laugh, glancing at Mike to see his reaction but Mike was already gone, having scrambled from the table as soon as Lucas had spoken, already across the room, throwing his only half-empty tray onto the return trolley..

Lucas, Dustin and Will quickly sprung up and followed him, Lucas calling out after him.

'Wait the hell up, Mike, jeez. It's not like she's going anywhere.'

But Mike barely heard them through the sudden roaring his ears, the urgency that suddenly beat at him overtaking every other thought and sense until all he could feel was the impatient need to get to Lucas's car, every second bringing him closer to seeing her again.

He pushed open the doors to the cafeteria and almost ran to the carpark where Lucas's old car sat, excitement bubbling up inside him, unable to believe that this was it, that it was really happening.

But it is real, he thought, the wide grin from before again creasing his cheeks as he put a little more speed into his legs. He was going to see her.

And he honestly couldn't wait.

Notes for the Chapter:

> What did you all think? As always leave reviews! I love all the encouraging and amazing comments you all give! xx
> P.S I may or may not be brainstorming a Christmas fic for next month :D No promises but I'm keeping my fingers crossed for it. xxx- Katie.

Author's Note:

> So...what did you all think? Please review, I love hearing from you all xxx